

A Goal to Lower Cholesterol Results in a New Career

Finding purpose in WFPB culinary coaching and services

by Heather Borders

When I told one of my best friends from college that my husband, Lee, and I were going to try a plant-based diet for 30 days, without missing a beat she asked, “How is that possible? You don’t eat anything green!” I was not one to try new foods, and I followed recipes to the letter whenever I cooked. I grew up with a mom that cooked quite frequently, but, like all kids, I loved the times when she was too tired to prepare dinner at home and picked up fast food instead.

Tying nutrition to health didn’t land on my radar until I was first married. Lee’s cholesterol was always high, even in his twenties and despite his being thin and physically active. By the time he was 30, his cholesterol was over 250. Even then, we only made modest attempts to exercise and eat foods that were considered healthy, such as switching to chicken and fish. As you can imagine, our attempts were futile. His cholesterol numbers kept rising.

The year my husband turned 34, a biometric screening showed that his cholesterol had climbed to 311. His LDL cholesterol was 189, and his triglycerides were 305, despite still being thin and active. These numbers definitely captured our full attention, and we were truly concerned about the trend. Add in the context of his family history of serious heart disease, and we knew we didn’t have the option of addressing this issue passively.

Our (obese) primary care physician strongly recommended medication and even forced Lee to sign an AMA (against medical advice) form when he rejected the prescription. While I was surprised at that, I understood that the med came with side effects, and we were too young not to search for an alternative solution—plus, the engineer in me loves a good challenge! So off we went to

search for ways to lower Lee’s cholesterol without the need for medication. I should add that my cholesterol test came back at 235, which was the first time it was over 200. This effort wasn’t just for his health; apparently our dietary lifestyle was affecting my health, too.

My initial search led me to the seminal books, like Dr. Campbell’s *The China Study* and Dr. Esselstyn’s *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease*. When the books came, I devoured them. I also ordered Rip Esselstyn’s *Engine 2 Diet*. I looked at my husband and asked if he was game to try this plant-based diet for a month, then test our cholesterol again to see if it made a difference. I was thrilled to hear he was on board! I figured we could do anything for a month. There’s no contract, right? We can stop at any point, right? I was very excited to conduct our plant-based experiment.

If you’ve been down this path before, you know the drill. I emptied my pantry and fridge, giving the food away to a coworker. I think I went to the grocery store every day that week. Before that, I honestly don’t think I had ever eaten beans as an adult. I liked some vegetables, but can’t say I had experience in cooking a wide variety of them. Needless to say, I had a lot to learn! I was cooking one new recipe after another and buying all kinds of new ingredients. Some recipes were winners, and some were not and went right in the trash. But we were committed to our experiment, and if we had to eat hummus and cereal with plant-based milk for dinner, so be it. Over those four weeks we learned how to plan better, pack our lunches more often, eat before social events, and keep away from restaurants. I can’t lie, we were exhausted. But we were anxious to see if this was going to work.



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We were able to retest our cholesterol levels six weeks after starting a plant-based diet. All we had done was change our diet; we were too busy learning a new way to shop, prep, and cook that we didn’t have time to work out. We were thrilled to see Lee’s total cholesterol had dropped 80 points from 311 to 232. His LDL had dropped from 189 to 152, and his triglycerides had dropped from 305 to 103! Even though we understood that the numbers were not yet within normal limits, we were still doing cartwheels over the dramatic improvement in just a short period of time.

While this new dietary lifestyle had resulted in an immediate improvement in Lee’s cholesterol, my cholesterol was being a little stubborn. It went down, but only by 15 points. By this time, *Forks Over Knives* had been released, and it reinforced my hunch that there was something legitimate about this lifestyle. So, we kept pushing forward. We were enjoying the foods, Lee didn’t have as many gastrointestinal issues anymore, and he dropped about 15 pounds pretty quickly.

We tested our cholesterol levels every few months, and it took about a year before my total cholesterol levels dropped below 180. It's a testimony to how different our responses were to similar interventions and to how these things can take time. We found ourselves loving the new foods we were eating, becoming much more efficient preparing meals, feeling better, and witnessing the impressive results.

I began to read everything related to plant-based nutrition that I could get my hands on, and soon I discovered the wonderful nonprofit organization, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM). I immediately applied to be a Food for Life (FFL) instructor so I could formally teach plant-based cooking classes in my area. I loved teaching the Kickstart Your Health program, where attendees set out to eat a plant-based diet for four weeks; it reminded me of how I started! I have observed that many people, while initially hesitant to experiment in the kitchen, become incredibly adventurous once they possess basic culinary skills and experience meaningful health improvements.

The FFL attendees kept telling me they were losing weight, their blood pressures were lower, and their glucose was better regulated. But my background was in engineering and business, not medicine, and I felt stuck when they asked me clinical questions I couldn't answer. I couldn't stop thinking about making a career move to where I could be in a position to help others prevent and reverse chronic disease. I knew there were other people who were in a similar position as my husband had been, searching for a nonpharmaceutical solution to lowering cholesterol. After researching various options, I decided to go back to school and become a registered dietitian.

Three more years of school and 1,200 hours of supervised practice hours later, I passed the national registered dietitian exam in June 2016. In addition to my formal training in the classroom, I earned the Plant-Based Nutrition Certificate from the Center for Nutrition Studies and the Professional Plant-Based Nutrition Culinary Certificate from Rouxbe. I also attended as many plant-based nutrition conferences as I could, including PCRM's International Conference on Nutrition in Medicine, Plantrician Project's International Conference in Plant-Based Nutrition in Healthcare, and the International

Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition. Learning from the pioneering clinicians who have guided patients to unprecedented health recoveries reinforced my decision to pursue a career in dietetics and confirmed that nutrition was an avenue to change the trajectory of people's lives for the better.

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Over the last seven years, I have run a small culinary nutrition private practice that offers nutrition counseling, community nutrition education, and personal chef culinary services through my business, Kailo Nutrition (kailonutrition.com). In 2019, I partnered with a local plant-based restaurant to launch a 90-day pilot program called Meals That Heal, which combined individual counseling, one prepared plant-based meal per day, and group cooking classes. All participants experienced either dramatic improvement or reversal of symptoms associated with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or gastrointestinal disorders.

Last year, I joined forces with Dr. Michael Klaper, helping to facilitate his Moving Medicine Forward (MMF) efforts. Dr. Klaper is committed to educating medical students and the clinical decision makers of the future about how plant-based nutrition has the ability to prevent and reverse disease, something he never learned was possible during his training. I can feel the needle moving, knowing the MMF initiative reached hundreds of medical students last year who will go on to influence thousands of patients over the course of their careers.

More recently, I joined Dr. Bhoja Katipally's New Me Health team to help build and grow the plant-based nutrition curriculum as part of his San Antonio lifestyle medicine practice. Dr. Katipally has a team of nurses,



HEATHER AND DR. KLAPER

dietitians, and personal trainers to help guide cohorts of patients through a six-month lifestyle-medicine immersion.

In 2023, I will be launching my first online course! It's a virtual-grocery-store course that helps the plant-curious decrease time in the kitchen by leveraging homemade foods with packaged foods that are both convenient and minimally processed. The course also covers the typical nutritional benefits of plants, provides cooking demonstrations, and offers strategies for sustainable behavior change.

It's exciting to see the plant-based movement gaining more traction with each year that passes. When I began my plant-based journey with that four-week experiment, I had no idea it would have such a profoundly beneficial effect not only on my health, but also on my career. Now, nearly 12 years later, there are countless resources that I wish I'd known were available when I began, including the NHA. I actually just recently learned about the NHA when I met Mark and Wanda Huberman at the Ethos Farm Day held in September, 2022. Once I thumbed through the magazines, I immediately signed up for a membership. Not only do the magazines include valuable clinical articles, but they also have other content that can be helpful for my patients as they navigate their personal journey to better health.

Whether I'm counseling patients, cooking for clients, or helping physicians implement lifestyle medicine within their practice, my goal is to help others find ways to *Taste Life!* 🌱