

A Camper Van and an Unusual Mission

Finding Healthy Restaurant Options Became Their Unexpected Calling

by Sharon Dunmall

At age 57, I thought I had the ideal life. The kids were mostly out of the house and pursuing their own lives. I had a stressful, but rewarding, job working as a before- and after-school director at an elementary school. My husband, Chris, had a very successful career and was a leading figure in his profession, both locally and internationally. This gave us the opportunity to travel regularly and be wined and dined at the most luxurious conference hotels. We balanced a busy life with what we thought was healthy eating and exercise.

Looking back, I certainly never thought of food as a threat, but on August 1, 2018, my life changed forever, leading me to realize that the standard American diet was slowly, but surely, bringing me to the brink.

During the previous two months, I had started to notice fatigue and reduced stamina. After a 43-mile bike ride in the Colorado mountains, I nearly collapsed, and I realized that I needed to call my doctor. She ran some tests and sent me directly to the ER. In the hospital, I had further stress tests, and on failing those, they sent me to the cath lab to take a closer look at what was going on.

I woke up with my doctor standing over me telling me that I was incredibly lucky to be alive. My left anterior descending artery, AKA the widow-maker, had been 98% clogged. They stented the artery and sent me to my room, where I realized how much better I felt. It had been years since I felt this good! The questions rolling through my mind were numerous. How serious was this? How did this happen? What are the chances of recurrence? What kind of meds will I be taking? Do I need to change my lifestyle? How was I going to get all these questions answered?

Obviously, my life had just changed directions, and I had much to learn. First, I now had a foreign object in my chest. The doctors reassured me that I would not feel it, but still, my chest felt strange, and I was uneasy about it. The doctors gave me the meds I needed to keep my heart going and briefed me about a “heart-healthy” diet. I would need to do some rehab for six to eight weeks, two to three times a week. Over the years since then, I have worked with my docs to reduce the meds, but due to the critical location of my stent and my age, I need to be extra proactive to protect my heart.

Okay, that was a start, but how was I going to answer all these questions I had? What role would my loving, smart husband play in my recovery?

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Both Chris and I thought that we had been living an extremely healthy lifestyle. We hiked, biked, walked, played golf, and were active in everything we did. We knew that something had to change drastically, but I did not have a clue as to where to start. So, Chris, who is an analyst by trade, decided to do some research. He surveyed medical journals and discovered that inserting stents relieved the symptoms of coronary artery disease but did not reverse the progression of the disease. To turn this story around we needed to find the cause of the problem.



Chris found the book *How to Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease*, by Caldwell B. Esselstyn, MD. As he read the book, which is evidence-based, he experienced a couple of “aha” moments. The first was that coronary heart disease does not need to exist. The second was the realization that the food you put in your mouth can do tremendous harm to your endothelial cells and allow plaque to build up, which will lead to heart disease. After we both read that book, we moved on to Dr. T. Colin Campbell's *The China Study*, which details his studies on the link between diet and disease. Things were starting to make sense: it was our diet that was rich in saturated fats, salt, and sugar that was causing our issues.

Chris and I talked about what we had eaten over time since we were kids. We grew up in a generation that believed that you had to have red meat (and lots of it) along with lots of cheese and dairy products. My mother was raised on a dairy farm and thought you needed dairy products for calcium and protein.

We watched a video with Dr. Neal Barnard in which he talked about his North Dakota upbringing and how his mother would store a jar of bacon fat on a shelf to use to fry other foods. Sadly, our families had the

same culinary traditions. After doing more research by reading medical journals and books like Dr. Dean Ornish's *Reversing Heart Disease* and Simon Hill's *The Proof is in the Plants*, we decided to go on a whole-food, plant-based diet with no oil, salt, or sugar. The evidence clearly showed that by eating this way I could prevent another event.

Following this path would be daunting, though. My cardiologist even said that the Mediterranean diet would be the best course, because no one would ever remain compliant with a WFPB, SOS-free diet, but that was not enough for us. We started with what we called "gateway drugs," such as faux meat burgers and sausages, vegan cheeses, and vegan salad dressings. I cleaned out our kitchen and got rid of all the processed, packaged foods and all the meat. As we explored this new lifestyle, we discovered new ways to cook and new ingredients we had never heard of. That was the really fun part of the transition!

I wanted to take my knowledge and all the research that Chris did to the next level. How could we learn more and develop our culinary skills so that I might be able to help other people who wanted to make the transition? I enrolled in the eCornell Plant-Based Nutrition Certificate course, which taught me about the effects of factory farming on the environment and animal welfare, how the American food system emphasizes refined and processed foods over healthy whole foods full of nutrients, and how modern chronic diseases are caused by diet and lifestyle. I completed the course and now have the tools I need to help other people in making the transition to a plant-based life.

The next step was to convert all the comfort foods that I grew up with into healthy versions. I learned how to dry sauté foods so I did not have to add oils. Why did we ever think we needed oil and all that saturated fat in every pan? The oil-free sauces and gravies add great flavor to our favorite foods, including the umami flavor, which can be achieved with mushroom bases and potato and nutritional yeast purées. My most skeptical diners, our grandchildren, gobble down my mac and cheese and my vegetable lasagna dishes. Every food that you've enjoyed can be replicated in a WFPB format!

The hardest change was adapting strategies to approach food consumed outside of the house in situations where we had no control over what was served. The social adjustments were very trying and tedious.

Family and friends understood what we were doing but were not always supportive. When going out, they would order anything they wanted while we were stuck ordering off the side menus, which was not even satisfying. We had to console ourselves with the thought that we were there for the social experience and not the food. Only recently have we been able to find acceptable options at popular restaurants.

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It has been over five years since my heart event, and every day is still a struggle. But I now know that the food that I put in my mouth can either harm me or make me healthy.

Our journey does not end there. We had been traveling to Panama City, FL, in October of 2021 and discovered it was a food desert. We could not find a restaurant that had any resemblance to WFPB, oil-free meals; everything was either deep-fried or dripping with added oil. We had anticipated a relaxing and romantic beach vacation, but the frustration of finding only unappetizing and unhealthy standard American diet foods made us angry and frustrated. It was almost the end of our marriage. The only thing that saved us was finding a vegan restaurant in Destin, FL, where the owner, chef, and staff were committed to serving fresh and healthy food in a supportive environment.

On the drive home, I had an idea. If we were this hard-pressed to find healthy restaurants, then everyone else in America is faced with the same issue. Let us write up the story and see if the editors of *Forks Over Knives* magazine will publish it. Chris, who loves to write, submitted the story to the magazine along with an idea that they accepted. With the support and encouragement of our editors, we have found our mission!

We now travel around in our camper van, "Vinny," in search of restaurants that serve healthy food. When we find them, we interview the chefs and write up articles for magazines. As the WFPB message becomes more widely accepted, emerging chefs and restaurateurs are opening new restaurants and revamping old ones with a focus on serving wholesome, nourishing dishes. We have met many in every state, and we are



SHARON AND HER GRANDDAUGHTER, LILLY, IN 2017.

trying to sing their praises wherever we can find a media outlet. Public interest in healthy, plant-based living is growing rapidly; currently plant-based foods are the fastest growing segment in the food industry.

In our travels this year, we also spent a week on the Holistic Holiday at Sea cruise where we were introduced to members of the National Health Association. It was inspiring to meet like-minded folks who share our passion for a healthy, plant-based lifestyle. For once, I was able to share my story and not have to explain how I used to see food as a threat, but now see it as a healer.

Looking back at my journey, I realize that as serious as my heart event was, it led Chris and I down a good path, including our membership in the National Health Association. We are happy, extremely healthy, and hopefully helping people along the way. The NHA has provided a plethora of resource materials along with access to movement-leading speakers and informative podcasts. Most importantly, it has provided us with an affinity group to share our health journey and reaffirm our commitment to a healthy lifestyle. We know the facts and evidence behind what we are doing, and I feel good about what our future holds! 🌱