

The Heart of the Matter

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by Chaunie Brusie on January 17, 2016



Four local residents share the moments that changed their lives—and their hearts

Many of us take the hard-working, odd-shaped organ steadily beating away in our chests for granted, but the truth is that heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Each year, one in four deaths occurs as a result of heart disease and 735,000 Americans have a heart attack.

Our hearts demand our attention and our respect, which is what these four mid-Michigan residents discovered. They are on a new journey to healthier, heart-happier lifestyles and sharing what they've learned along the way.

Habit of the heart

Randall Griebel doesn't recall exactly how he started smoking, but sometime in his youth he picked up the habit that would see him through the next 30 years of his life. Griebel, 50, a father of four, grandfather, and an electrician in Saginaw Township, explains that eventually he got to the point where he was "tired" of having smoking in his life.

So he quit, and even then he soon found that he was becoming severely short of breath. "I was worried about COPD," Griebel explains. "I couldn't do yard work. I couldn't walk my dogs. It just got to be where I couldn't do anything."

After a quick trip to his care provider, nurse practitioner Candance Negrete with Heritage Family Physicians, Griebel discovered that he had 100, 90, and 80 percent blockages in his coronary arteries. So, in July, he had triple bypass surgery at St. Mary's of Michigan in Saginaw.

Despite having the setback of developing blood clots in his leg and lung after surgery, Griebel was able to recover quickly and has implemented family-wide changes for better health. Besides going through the cardiac rehabilitation program with St. Mary's, Griebel also walks five miles a day and has changed his eating habits with the help of his wife. "I use vegetables as a snack food now," he says.

Griebel also praises the staff of St. Mary's for the treatment and care they gave him. "I'm a demanding, whiny person," he says, "and everyone I dealt with for the whole time I was there was just phenomenal."

Today, Griebel laments not making his health a priority in his life sooner. "I blew off my health for years," he admits. He hopes that others will be able to learn from his experience and put health first. "You don't have to be a health nut and run 100 miles a week," Griebel advises. "But just get out there and do something."

A woman's intuition

Geneva "Doris" Vernot, a 69-year-old mother and grandmother from Vassar, was walking up the stairs one day when she had to pause to catch her breath.

"I had chest pressure like a chest cold in the winter," Vernot explains, "and a little bit of shortness of breath." After taking her blood pressure with her home machine and seeing that her heart rate was normal, Vernot didn't think much of the situation. "I felt fine," she says. "I thought I was in excellent health."

But when it happened again, Vernot decided to mention her experience to her doctor at her annual physical. Eventually, Vernot discovered that her heart's blood vessels were so blocked she needed quadruple bypass surgery. "No one was more shocked than I was," Vernot relates.

Vernot underwent the surgery, along with a maze procedure for atrial fibrillation, with Dr. Ramesh Cherukuri at St. Mary's of Michigan in Saginaw.

When Vernot later visited her physician's assistant, Jennifer Radewahn, she remembers giving her a big hug and thanking her for saving her life. "But she said to me, 'Don't thank me, thank yourself,'" Vernot notes. "She said, 'You know your body, and I knew to listen to you.'"

Today, Vernot is passionate about encouraging other women to take active measures in their health. Despite thinking that she was doing all the right things to take care of herself, Vernot listened to the slight cues of her body telling her something was wrong.

"Listen to your body," Vernot urges. "Women are totally different. There was no jaw pain or back pain or arm pain—there was none of that." Vernot's doctor told her that in reality, her heart condition had been going on for over 10 years, yet she never knew. She feels the full weight of what could have happened if she had brushed off those instances as so many women do.

"Say something no matter how insignificant it may seem," says Vernot. "It just takes that one instance for it to become a life-changer."

An emergency situation

On a bright winter day in February 2010, Lee Howie, a paramedic of 22 years and manager with McLaren Bay Region Emergency Medical Service, was working when he started experiencing pain in his left arm. “I was in my office talking to someone, and it just came on suddenly,” Howie relates.

Luckily, Howie was one of the only 27 percent of individuals who know the warning signs of a heart attack and realized that he needed medical attention.

Howie walked out of his office into the ambulance quarters and in his no-nonsense manner, simply stated, “I think something’s going on.” When an EKG revealed that Howie was having an active heart attack, his crew transported him to McLaren Bay Region Hospital, where ER staff and a STEMI team were waiting for him. Four minutes after his arrival, Howie began experiencing dizziness and suffered an immediate cardiac arrest.

The team at McLaren Bay Region was able to resuscitate Howie, and the next morning he underwent bypass surgery, performed by Dr. Ramesh Cherukuri. Today, Howie lives with a literal change of heart. “I feel significantly better,” says Howie of his new lifestyle, which incorporates daily exercise and a heart-healthy diet. “I didn’t know how bad I did feel [previously] until I started to eat right and exercise. I thought the symptoms I was having were time and age, but they weren’t—they were because of my cardiovascular health.”

Howie shares his story, both personally and professionally, and wants everyone to take one simple lesson from his experience. Don’t delay.

Knowing the signs of a heart attack can save lives, especially for individuals with a family history of heart disease.

“Here I was, a paramedic for 22 years, with a team who did everything perfectly right and got me to the hospital as fast as possible, and I still went into cardiac arrest,” Howie says. “I want people to understand the importance of getting treated right away.”

A wake-up call

Maynard Coulson, a 67-year-old part-time software company employee from Shields, had always considered himself a “fairly healthy” person. Enjoying retirement from Consumers Energy, Coulson’s heart was really the last thing on his mind.

“I hadn’t been in a hospital overnight since 1967,” Coulson boasts. But that changed on September 10, when Coulson was playing bass in his church’s praise team. “I started to feel sharp pains in my chest, not the typical pressure that you hear about,” he describes. “It kept getting worse and worse.”

Luckily for Coulson, his niece, who works for MidMichigan Medical Center-Midland, recognized that something was going on and called an ambulance. The EMT team confirmed that Coulson was having a heart attack and rushed him to the hospital.

“It was a very bumpy ride,” Coulson remembers with a slight laugh. Bypassing the emergency department, Coulson was taken directly to the catheterization laboratory, where he was assessed by Dr. Michael Lauer. With a blockage of over 90 percent in one artery, Coulson underwent triple bypass surgery the next morning.

Still recovering from his surgery, Coulson is thankful to MidMichigan Medical Center for all of the tools they have given him to start his new, healthier lifestyle. “They’ve already set up a cardiac rehab program for me,” he explains. He’s looking forward to walking around with his wife in their subdivision and is planning to control food portion sizes in order to maintain a healthy weight.

And Coulson isn’t moving forward alone. His son also suffered from a heart attack. Coulson explains that seeing his son go through the experience solidified the importance of changing both of their lifestyles. “We are changing together,” says Coulson.