

THE SARASOTA

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**A TORTUOUS PATH
'DISTURBED' AND 'DISCOURAGED'
RECOVERED MILLIONS**

Inside

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Sonia Fuentes/Photo by Arielle Scherr

WHAT I DID FOR LIFE

Sarasota Memorial Hospital exercise physiologist Seth Stinson (in scrubs) works with Marilyn Bowker and Peter Farrell as part of the hospital's Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Program. Photo courtesy Sarasota Memorial Hospital

A HEART-HEALTHY DIET IS EASIER TO ADHERE TO THAN IT MAY SEEM, ESPECIALLY WITH PLENTY OF GROCERY AND RESTAURANT CHOICES IN SARASOTA

By Sonia Fuentes
Contributing Writer

On Sunday, July 24, 2011, I went to the Chautauqua Institution in Chautauqua, NY, for a week to give a talk titled, “The Second Wave of the Women’s Movement: Where It’s Been, Where It’s At” to the Road Scholar (formerly Elderhostel) attendees at the historic Athenaeum Hotel (where I was staying) and to attend a week’s programs on women’s rights issues around the world.

(I am a founder of the National Organization for Women — NOW — and a feminist activist and frequently write and speak about the women’s movement.)

I had an exhilarating week; and on Friday, July 29, the day before I was to fly home to Sara-

sota, I left my hotel to walk the few blocks to the Hall of Philosophy to hear what appeared to be a most interesting panel discussion. I had just walked a few feet and was standing at Chautauqua’s 5,000-seat amphitheater when suddenly I could not catch my breath and my legs would not move. I raised my hands and cupped them to bring air into my mouth and lungs, but that did not work. I looked down at my legs to see why they would not move but saw nothing different.

(Friends subsequently asked me why I did not call 911 when this started happening, since I had a cell phone. I am sorry to admit that it never occurred to me, perhaps because I did

not realize the seriousness of what was happening.)

Somehow, I was able to turn around and return to my room at the hotel. I realized I had three options:

- I could lie down and rest.
- I could begin packing for my trip home the next day.
- I could try to get a ride to the hall and attend the panel discussion.

Naturally, I chose the third option. I asked one of the hotel's bellmen if he could give me a ride to the hall in one of the hotel's golf carts since I was not physically up to walking. He said he was not supposed to, but (perhaps moved by my woeful state) said he would.

After he drove me to the Hall of Philosophy, I found a seat and thoroughly enjoyed the 1¼-hour panel discussion. But, when it was over and I got up to return to my hotel, I again could not breathe and I could not walk. By

holding on to the tops of the seats, I somehow made my way out of the hall.

However, as I started to walk back to the hotel, I realized I could not do so. I looked for a bench

or a stoop on which to sit down, and found a bench. I sat down and thought: *If there were only some way in which I could get to the hotel and reach Laurie Paterniti, the director of the Road Scholar program, or Kay Hutton, her assistant, they would help me.* But I was blocks away from the hotel and throngs of people were marching in front of me, leaving the Hall of Philosophy. I looked up and there, in the midst of all those people, I saw Kay.

"Kay," I called to her. "I need help."

She came right over and I told her what had happened. She told me the Chautauqua Institution had a medical clinic only steps away. She wanted to run to it for help before it closed for the afternoon and asked me if I would be OK while she did so. I said I would.

Kay was back in a few minutes and said an ambulance was on the way. The ambulance came in short order, and Kay and I got inside. As soon as I was seated, the technician placed an oxygen mask over my face. Immediately,

I felt better and that shortness of breath and inability to walk never returned.

The ambulance took me to a nearby hospital, where the staff members gave me several tests but



*Jill Edwards checks on Peter Morrison as he uses the treadmill.
Photo courtesy Sarasota Memorial Hospital*

said they were not equipped to deal with my condition. They suggested I go to a second hospital, and Kay strongly recommended the Hamot Medical Center in Erie, PA, which I later learned was one of the top 50 hospitals in the U.S. By this time, Kay had been with me for 2½ hours and I insisted she go home for dinner; I told her I would be fine. Reluctantly, she left, and a second ambulance took me to Hamot.

I arrived there at 6:30 p.m. and at 8:30 p.m. Dr. Richard Petrella, a world-class cardiologist, was in my room. I asked him whether I could go home to Sarasota the next day as I had planned. Petrella said I could not do that: I had been diagnosed with acute coronary syndrome, but I had not had a heart attack.

However, the next morning when he came to my room again, Petrella said that if I wanted to, I could return to Sarasota that day. I do not know what changed his mind; perhaps he had seen some positive test results. He went on to say that I could also stay and he would run some tests on me beginning Monday, Aug. 1. The choice was up to me.

I did not know what to do. I was 83 years old; my clothes, computer and everything I had packed for a week's stay in Chautauqua were in Chautauqua; I was in Erie, PA, where I knew no one; and I had commitments back home in Sarasota.

I had had a cardiologist in Sarasota since I had been diagnosed with a mild heart murmur, so I telephoned her.

She said, "Sonia, you look decades younger than you are, and I've been treating you that way. I haven't given you lots of tests. Stay at Hamot and have the tests."

Kay kindly offered to pack my things and ship them to Sarasota, and Petrella said he would perform a catheterization on me on Aug. 1.

On Monday morning, I awoke with strong feelings of guilt. I had felt absolutely fine since the oxygen mask had been placed on my face in the first ambulance. I had Kay packing and shipping my things, I had others set to handle my commitments at home and I was about to have a catheterization — all for nothing. I shared my thoughts with Petrella, who paid no attention to me.

After the procedure, Petrella told me the catheterization had revealed two blockages in the arteries of my heart and he was glad he had also done an ultrasound, which showed two more blockages where he had not expected them. He had implanted four stents in three arteries of my heart that were 75 percent to 85 percent blocked.

Petrella put me on daily doses of a blood thinner, which he said he wanted me to stay on for the rest of my life (as it keeps the stents open), as well as a statin (to keep my cholesterol level down) and on baby aspirin. I had already been on blood pressure medication for several years.

(Subsequently, I had to stop taking the statin because it caused muscle pain, as well as the blood pressure medication. Fortunately, my blood pressure and cholesterol level stabilized without them.)

Ordinarily, I would have been able to go home the next day, but I had a reaction to the anesthesia. Because of that and the difficulties of making travel arrangements from my hospital bed, I was not able to leave until two days later.

Before I left Hamot, I asked Petrella whether I could go on a long-planned 10-day tour of Germany and Belgium one month after the implantation of the stents. He said, “On one condition.”

When I asked him what that was, he said, “You must send me a postcard from Berlin.”

On Sept. 4, I left for my trip.

REHAB

On my return, when I was casually looking at my discharge instructions for the first time, I saw I was supposed to take a cardiac rehab course. Petrella’s nurse confirmed this when I called. No one at Hamot had mentioned this to me.

I then signed up for the Cardiac Rehabilitation Program at the Sarasota Memorial Health Care

System at 5880 Rand Boulevard (off Clark Road). The program is designed to help those who have experienced a cardiac event return to the highest level of functioning possible. It consists of 36 one-hour sessions, which one can attend either two or three times a week.

The program includes individualized exercises (with monitoring of blood pressure, heart rate and heart rhythms) and lifestyle education lectures designed to keep participants informed of important strategies to protect heart health. I am covered by Medicare and a secondary insurer; Medicare picked up 80 percent of the cost, and my secondary insurer picked up the remainder.

One of those lectures, by Jill Edwards, a clinical exercise physiologist with a master’s degree in science, was about nutrition — and it changed my life.



(From left): Exercise physiologist Meredith Cleveland (left) talks with Marilyn Bowker as Bowker and Peter Farrell work on bikes. Exercise physiologist Seth Stinson keeps an eye on Jill Edwards (in blue scrubs at the top of the photo) as she works with patients. Photo courtesy Sarasota Memorial Hospital

I did not think I would have much to learn at the lecture because I felt I was pretty savvy about the subject already. I was 4 feet 10½ inches tall and weighed 124 pounds, a little overweight but nothing horrendous. I had been educating myself for years on healthful eating: I watched calories, cholesterol, fat and salt and had eschewed red meat for years, eating chicken and fish instead.

At the Hamot Medical Center, Petrella had given me a pamphlet titled, “Low Cholesterol or Low Animal Fat, Low Sodium Diet,” dated January 2006, which was pretty much what I had been eating all along. In fact, I had wondered why I had had the blockages in my arteries since I had paid such close attention to my diet.

At her lecture, Jill distributed a seven-page handout she had prepared. The principal points in her lecture and the handout follow:

1. Eighty percent of our diet has to consist of vegetables, fruit, legumes and nuts.
2. Dairy products and processed foods are to be avoided. (It took me considerable time thereafter to determine what processed foods were. The definition can vary slightly, but the term usually refers to foods that are packaged in boxes, cans or bags. These foods include bacon, sausage, hot dogs, pepperoni, ham and packaged luncheon meat, including low-fat deli meat.)
3. Whole grain bread, cereals and other products are recommended.
4. One does not need to eat foods from animals to get enough protein.
5. Oils, including olive oil, are to be limited.

6. One’s intake of added sugar, sugar substitutes and salt are to be limited. (Conventional wisdom has always been that one should avoid salt except when it is needed after physical activity. A June 2012 [New York Times article](#), however, stated that evidence supporting this advice is very weak.)

7. The handout recommended several books and websites. Among the books were Dr. Joel Fuhrman’s *Eat to Live* and Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn’s *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease*. (You can read about [Esselstyn](#).)

Among the websites was www.pcrm.org.

In addition, a friend recommended a superb DVD on the subject, [Forks Over Knives](#).

I came away from Jill’s lecture totally bewildered and with endless questions buzzing in my brain. How could I give up so many foods I enjoyed? Since I rarely cook, what grocery stores could I shop at that would have such foods already prepared? Since I frequently eat out, what restaurants could I go to? No dairy foods? What would I do for milk?

I learned that Jill’s lecture and handout were only the beginning of an educational project on which I needed to embark. I concluded that the project was worth the time, effort, and money it would entail *because I wanted to keep on living*. The questions I had just kept coming, but I wrote them down and asked Jill if she could meet with me one-on-one to answer them. She agreed, and we met on three occasions for about 45 minutes each.

NEW DIETARY HABITS

I learned a great many things — for example, to seek out organic foods. I learned that many

kinds of non-dairy milks are in the supermarket and that local gourmet grocery stores carry a good many prepared vegetarian items. I learned balsamic vinegar and olive oil make a good salad dressing.

I also learned to avoid processed egg substitutes and to eat whole eggs instead.

Additionally, I learned it was all right to go off my diet at the occasional reception and cocktail party as long as I went right back on afterwards.

I found a good many local restaurants have vegetarian and vegan options.

When I am going to a function given by an organization at a local restaurant or country club, I request a vegetarian meal and fresh fruit cup for dessert in advance.

As a vegetarian, I am in good company. President Clinton, who had quadruple bypass sur-

gery and the implantation of two stents, now considers himself a vegan.

Vegetarians and vegans, however, are still a tiny proportion of the U.S. population. The latest update on vegetarianism is contained in a [Gallup poll of July 2012](#).

Jill told me to stop worrying about calories and fat and to focus instead on eating properly. She turned out to be right. In short order, I lost about seven pounds and have kept them off, and my cholesterol dropped from 201 to 174.

Jill's handout included the following quote from Hippocrates, the iconic Greek philosopher who was born around 460 B.C., died around 370 B.C., and is considered to have been the first physician in human history: "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food."

It was true then and it is true today. 



Jill Edwards works with Peter Morrison (left) and Robert Lew. Photo courtesy Sarasota Memorial Hospital