



SHANTHA DIAZ, AHA VOLUNTEER & CHAIR OF THE 2016 SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND GO RED FOR WOMEN CAMPAIGN

AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION

Million Hearts® in Action

[Strategies for Achieving Million Hearts® Goals]



Shantha Diaz lost both of her parents to heart attacks when they were in their 70s, but she attributed the loss to their age. Then her brother died from a heart attack. He was only 56. The pattern alarmed Shantha's doctor, who ordered a round of blood tests and an ultrasound on her carotid artery. Upon getting the results, "he pretty much read me my rights," Shantha recalled. "He said I was a walking ticking time bomb that could go off any day and I could have a heart attack or a stroke."

Shantha reacted with shock. She already excluded meat from her diet and kept an active lifestyle. Still, after learning from a friend about a plant-based diet popular for fighting heart disease, she quickly adopted the program and changed her eating habits. She also started exercising regularly. Within a few months, she dropped 40 pounds – and her cholesterol level dropped 100 milligrams.

"It is back to the garden," she said of her diet she sticks to today, many years later. "There is no magic pill to it. It is your mind, your determination that you want to be alive, that you want to take care of yourself. You want to do good things for your family. You want to be productive at work. I consider health is wealth, and it all starts with you."

“Here I am, six years down the road. I'm alive and I'm active. I could never run before – I run now. I can do a lot of things. I feel really energized. I celebrate life every day.”

– Shantha Diaz, on her new lifestyle



¹http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/Cholesterol/Cholesterol_UCM_001089_SubHomePage.jsp
and <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/resources/heart/heart-cholesterol-hbc-what-html>

²http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/circulationaha/129/25_suppl_2/S76.full.pdf

³<http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/early/2016/10/27/CIR.0000000000000462>

[Fast Facts]

- Shantha changed her diet and exercise habits and dramatically lowered her cholesterol level. She also lost weight and reduced her risk for heart disease and stroke.
- High cholesterol is one of the major controllable risk factors for coronary heart disease, heart attack and stroke. As blood cholesterol rises, so does the risk of coronary heart disease.¹
- The “2013 AHA/ACC Guideline on Lifestyle Management to Reduce Cardiovascular Risk” recommends 40 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity 3 to 4 d/wk to help control blood pressure and to improve blood cholesterol levels.²
- The AHA recommends that most adults get at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week, for Shantha to meet these goals, she set a personal goal of “10,000 steps per day.”³

[What She Did]

- She adopted a healthier diet and changed her exercise routine, starting with regular use of the elliptical machine. Now she takes advantage of every opportunity to incorporate physical activity into her day. She nearly always opts for stairs over the elevator, and she also tries to get outside whenever possible.

“Whenever the weather is really good, I walk an outside loop of 2.5 miles to 3 miles a day.”

[What She Accomplished]

- She incorporated regular exercise into her schedule and lost 40 pounds.
- Shantha also helped reduce the cholesterol level of her husband, who followed her lead.



[What We Learned]

- Diaz said she learned that cardiac events can be prevented, and heart conditions even reversed, through diet and exercise. “Prevention is definitely better than cure,” she said.
- Shantha educated herself on the steps to take and lifestyle changes she needed to make.

“The choices that you make can make you or break you. I was educated that there is a possibility I could make a change. I was at a crossroad, and I had to choose which way I wanted to go, and so I chose life,” she said.

- She discovered an entire way of cooking with less saturated fat, and used more whole grains, vegetables and fruits.

“I experimented with different types of cooking under the constraints of my boundaries and I learned I really am not limited by these changes,” she said. “Now I can fix Thai food, Italian food, Indian food, regular food. It’s all about education – and learning what substitutions you can make so that you can eat things you like, and that’s good for you.”