Reversing Heart Disease One Run at a Time

57 year old heart attack victim runs Nissan Toronto Ten-Miler and has his heart set on the Nova Scotia Marathon in September.

In the summer of 2006 Dr. Michael Irving, a psychotherapist and sculptor, suffered a heart attack. He was 95% blocked in one heart artery and 90% and 70% blocked in two other arteries. If this heart event had occurred 30 years ago he would likely not be alive today. Irving says, “My heart blockages had built up to a critical stage of a walking time bomb that went off.

His wife’s action of giving him two aspirins to thin the blood and getting him to Toronto East General Hospital in minutes began the process of saving his life. Medical interventions in Cardiac Intensive Care over the week kept him alive through another three heart events.

Irving is sure, “Each life-threatening episode punctuated the reality -- if I do not seriously address the needs of my health I will not see spring, be a part of my grandchildren’s lives or finish my publications or projects.” The undeniable screaming voice of his heart made him resolve to review the poor lifestyle path he had charted.

Cardiologist, Dr. George Rewa strongly recommended an immediate triple-bypass surgery. Irving fought for the option of angioplasty and three stents. Rewa cautiously gave his support. It was emphasized these were only temporary measures. He was assured, “If you keep up your ways, in time you will be back in the hospital or taking a permanent rest by passing to the other side.”

For Irving “The heart attack was a gift in the form of a wake up call.” He was tipping the scales at 240 lbs. A work schedule of 60 to 70 hours a week did not allow exercise or stress release. For Irving, “The heart attack made this a sobering time of do or die.” Following the advise of Dr. Dean Ornish in “Reversing Heart Disease” he and his wife took up a mainly vegetarian approach to eating and got rid of all the oils in the house.

While still at the hospital he began walking a slow 20 minutes a day. “For the next two months I added a minute a day to the time walking.” After building up the duration of walking he increased the distance and speed. “I always wore a Polar Heart Monitor. I kept a constant eye on the heart rate when walking fast or jogging and would slow down when I went over my safety zone. There was a balance of pushing the edge in trying to build my heart and clear the arteries, but not cause damage or another heart attack.”

“Every day of increasing the intensity of workouts was shadowed with a fear of risking death. The option of holding back and staying obese held the certainty of an early death.” Enrolling in the Toronto Rehab Cardiac Program, “Gave lots of regular cardiac expertise, a methodical exercise prescription and a holistic approach to heart health.” Before the end of winter Irving reached 20 to 30 miles of walking and jogging a week and he had lost more than 70 lbs.
At six months into his rehab program, Irving took a second battery of physiological tests. The following day Evelyn Rubin, the Cardiac Rehabilitation Supervisor at Toronto Rehab, called him to say that in her 25 years at the Rehab Clinic she had never seen as much change across a broad range of measures. They expect an improvement of 14% to 15% in one year and he had an improvement of 46% in 6 months. His VO2 of 26% when he started was average for a 65 year old and at 6 months his VO2 increase to 36% paired him with a healthy 40 year old.

“I felt validated for all the hard work I was doing every day to improve and turn around my cardiac disease. I was feeling 25 years younger and friends and others were regularly commenting about seeing the same change. There was an energy and calm I had not experienced in decades.”

Irving believes there were a variety of key elements to reversing his severe heart disease. In addition to exercise and diet, he took up meditation; did healing visualizations; took medications and supplements specifically for the heart and arteries; reduced his work week; spent more time with family, friends and reading; got more sleep and looked at dealing with excessive stress.

He now cross trains with an equal time of biking and running each week. “I find varying activities is better on the knees and hip joints.” For a first year anniversary to his heart attack Irving celebrated with a 75 km Heart and Stroke Ride for Heart on June 1st and on July 1st Canada Day he did the 10 km Hbc Run for Canada. This weekend Irving is running in the Nissan Toronto Ten-Miler that he hopes is a perfect tune-up for the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon at the end of September.

More than half a million North Americans will die of heart disease this year. Irving says, “It became clear heart disease is the number one killer in North America. I feel a passion about my own recovery and sharing the gift of my lessons with others.”

In looking at the activities that brought about dramatic changes in Irving’s heart disease he has developed a program called “Eleven Wisdoms to a Healthy Heart”. These eleven tenants are: Family and Friends, Listen to your Heart, Take Charge, Harmony and Balance, Heart Healthy Food, Exercise for Life, Health Care Team, Medicines and Supplements, Meditation and Relaxation, Visualization, Spiritual Connection.

The Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation says, “Cardiovascular disease is largely preventable.” According to Irving, “Through hard work and focused commitment even developed cardiovascular heart disease can be reversed. Incorporating the ‘Eleven Wisdoms to a Healthy Heart’ is a good place to start.”

When Irving runs the Nissan Toronto Ten-Miler this weekend it will be one more race to reverse and prevent heart disease. Find out more about Irving and his clinical work and art projects at www.irvingsstudios.com.