

Cardiologist opens eyes, hearts with Rotary presentation

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By Stephanie Penick

In addition to friendships you can make following a motto of "service above self," individuals who join Rotary clubs quickly discover the other main attraction is weekly opportunities to learn from guest presentations.

Enlightening, engaging programs provide insights and understanding into subjects you might otherwise miss in your daily routines.

When I first joined the Rotary Club of Naperville more than a dozen years ago, I became in awe of speakers who had climbed Mount Everest, traveled among polar bears in the Arctic Circle, or participated in the Olympic Torch relay. Most were regular, down-to-earth people with a spirit for adventure or to make a difference.

About a year ago, 25 of us chartered what's been tagged the "4:44 Rotary," Naperville's third Rotary club.

Even before we officially were the Rotary Club of Naperville/Downtown -- one of some 32,000 clubs worldwide -- our programs enriched us about different cultures.

Early on, topics ranged from the progress of the new Wentz Concert Hall and Fine Arts Center at North Central College to the hobby of beekeeping. More recently programs have featured personal life-saving experiences from African nuns seeking basics such as clean water and nutrition for mothers and children with HIV/AIDS in Upendo Village, Kenya, to Naperville Rotarian Kent Demuth, who served on a polio immunization team in Bangladesh.

Last week, Rotarian Pat Benton introduced Dr. Joseph Marek, a clinical cardiologist with Midwest Heart Specialists. Our featured speaker informed us about life-saving opportunities right here.

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death nationwide as well as in Illinois.

And under the leadership of Dr. Vincent Bufalino, Marek's partner, the Midwest Heart Community Foundation strives to increase the awareness about sudden cardiac death in young adults.

Marek's Power Point presentation touched on recent stories about local teens, seemingly in peak athletic condition, who suddenly died during sports and dance competitions.

I began to make connections.

In the U.S. alone, Marek continued, it's estimated that every week sudden cardiac death claims the lives of 30 young adults, usually during intense physical activity. More than 7,000 young people younger than 18 die from undetected heart conditions each year.

According to Marek, simple, inexpensive cardiac screening likely could have prevented about one-third of these tragedies.

I had no idea.

Marek continued with staggering statistics and research studies. He said the Midwest Heart Community Foundation's Young Hearts for Life program has been used by Naperville Unit District 203. His group has an immediate goal to make the screening available to every high school student in DuPage County every other year. The testing is free so every student can participate, athlete or not.

I later visited the foundation's Web site, www.midwestheart.org.

That's where I also read about the 10th Heart for Life, 5K Run/Walk June 22 at the Lisle Hilton Hotel. The free family-friendly event promotes a heart-healthy lifestyle for all fitness levels.

For 10 years, this event didn't attract my attention.

But back at Wednesday's Rotary, familiarity with Marek's goals began to resonate. I was eager to get back to my computer to check a recent e-mail from Doris Bender, mother of Kathryn Bender, a beautiful, spirited and gifted dancer whose life ended unexpectedly on Nov. 20, 2005.

Marek provided a number of stories about promising young athletes who suffered sudden cardiac death, the silent heart condition HCM. He noted that in the U.S. about 20 million teens participate in athletics. Marek said an electrocardiogram (EKG) can detect certain impulse patterns or "markers" associated with HCM that a stethoscope cannot.

The International Olympic Committee and the European Society of Cardiology recommend the screenings, but medical experts in the U.S. have yet to adopt the European routine.

Marek believes if we all ask our schools to help arrange the free screenings, we also can help raise awareness.

When I opened my e-mail, I found one that I'd saved.

"We are planning again for the third annual Kathryn Bender Memorial Dance Showcase," e-mailed Bender a few weeks ago.

The showcase will begin with a raffle preview at 6 p.m. and performances at 7 p.m. May 23 at College of DuPage Arts Center Mainstage in Glen Ellyn.