



Live Snap Shot: Interview with Essence Banks, Director of Heart N Hands, LLC. and Dr. Sheryl Martin-Schild

The Journey of Life

Dave Farbrook 5/3/2018



I had not considered the topic of women with heart disease until I met Essence Banks. I realized that women living with heart disease didn't live with a special badge or any outward physical sign and it was just not a topic of casual discussion in a hardware store. The American Heart Association produced a national study that concluded one in three women live with heart disease [American Heart Association's 2016 Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics Update – 2013].

Is heart disease just a part of the journey of life? I interviewed Essence Banks and Dr. Sheryl Martin-Schild and through the experiences and stories they shared with me I soon realized their passion for the importance of living a healthy life. In Louisiana heart disease is the number one killer of women. When Essence tells her story and Dr. Martin-Schild delivers the statistics to 500 girls attending a meeting in the school gym, the girls are shocked.



Dr. Martin-Schild recounted when she first met Essence it was during a talk show where Essence shared on live TV that she was diagnosed at age 30 with heart disease. "I was the physician that provided community-based education on the risk factors on heart disease and smoking. Essence presented on the topic of consequences of heart disease on women and younger people."



“Essence and I share the same goal of education.” Dr. Martin-Schild continued, “Essence learned that she had years of undiagnosed heart disease her physicians were unaware that someone so young and who had an otherwise healthy, active, lifestyle could have symptoms of heart disease. Vascular disease threatens your life and your future that could include being the parent or the spouse that you were intended to be. Early choices make an impact later on in health.”

“Many of these young girls are with grandparents” Dr. Martin-Schild said, “and sometimes the reason why these family members have arrived on time to the hospital is because their young granddaughter or son recognized the symptoms and knew what to do – to call 911 for help. Did you know that individuals living with obesity contributes 70% of the risk factor of stroke in people who are less than 55 years old?”

Many Louisiana residents are struggling with morbid obesity. Dr. Frederick P. Cerise of Caddo Parish Louisiana Department of Health emphasizes, “While there are many economic and social factors in the state that are known to contribute to negative health outcomes - - high rates of poverty, low levels of education, and a culture that just likes to eat, the questions remain: ‘What are we doing with the resources we have?’ and ‘Can we do better?’” [Parish Health Profiles – A tool for Community Health Planning, Caddo Parish Kathleen B. Blanco and Frederick P. Cerise, MD, MPH, October 2005].

Essence tells her personal story: “I began when I was diagnosed in 2004, I was thirty years old and healthy and active. I noticed shortness of breath and uncommon symptoms that lead to the discovery of heart disease. Some of the tests I was given seemed to indicate that I was having a panic attack and I was advised to take time off work. I knew this was not a typical sickness and I went to other doctors until I found a doctor who listened to me. After several cardio tests, I underwent an emergency Angiography and angioplasty. I had had over 90 percent blockage in two arteries.”

“I learned that the symptoms in women were different than in men and that was shocking to learn. One day, I told my story to 20 girls in LaPlace, Louisiana. One of the girls asked me, ‘Miss Essence do you feel sad that you have heart disease?’ I had to be honest and say, ‘Yes I was sad, I couldn’t understand why I had this. But then I got over the emotion.’”

“Even now, however, there are times when I think about it and my personality of ‘doing things till the wheels fell off.’ Yes, it was sad that I didn’t know my feelings, symptoms and all these other issues that I was going through, were all related to heart disease.”

Essence explained how she became involved with the community educating others about the seriousness of heart disease. She reflected, “The biggest part is, when the community started to hear about me, I became known as this ‘young girl who had heart disease’ who was spreading the information to schools, churches, health fairs and other social events about heart disease and prevention. The people really reached out to me.

Just recently, I spoke to Xavier University pharmacy students, who were not aware of my story and who benefited by the experience I shared. Because the risk factors are so high in the community, people sought out information on how to be healthy. People are now biking, exercising and the city seems ready to hear about health and the importance of keeping your heart healthy.”

Dr. Martin-Schild made an important observation; she said that during her practice when she explained to her patients their diagnosis and about heart health some patients would listen and some patients would not. “However, when I see my patients come out better than they were when I first treated them I feel that is the reward. It is those patents that I remember the most. In the same way, when Essence speaks out and educates the public at every opportunity, I feel that we share in the same reward.”