



If You Could Meet Your Hero, Who Would it Be?

By Joel Kahn, MD
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We all had heroes growing up. I loved Spider-Man as a child. A few weeks ago, I was doing a signing for my new book, *The Whole Heart Solution*. A Spider-Man action figure was on display a few feet away, and for just a moment I imagined meeting him (not so far-fetched, as Toby McGuire has a copy of my book).

Currently, my heroes are Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, featured in *Forks Over Knives*, and his wife Ann. Recently I got to meet them in depth, and they were even more delightful than I had expected.

Dr. Esselstyn, or “Essy,” as his family calls him, was trained as a breast and endocrine surgeon. He became interested in heart disease when he shared a locker with Dr. Rene Favalario, a cardiac surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic who performed the world’s first bypass operation. (Lockers were tight, and assigning Dr. E. to share space with Dr. F. changed heart history).

Dr. Esselstyn read about heart disease and was intrigued by populations worldwide who did not suffer from heart attacks (like the people of Papua, New Guinea). He studied their diets and also researched factors that injure heart arteries, such as a diet of processed foods loaded with animal fats and oils.

He concluded that a plant-based diet with no added oils would stop injuring arteries in patients with heart disease and allow them to heal. So in 1985, he recruited a group of heart patients with advanced blockages, some not expected to live a year, and he and Ann taught them to eat in this manner to heal their hearts. His published results indicated the reversal of heart blockages, as evidenced by increased longevity, elimination of symptoms, and even improved sexual function in study subjects. (The disease reversal was later verified on follow-up stress tests and angiograms.)

In 2014, Dr. Esselstyn published the results of new research, extended to a larger group of subjects, and the results were stunning. During the course of the study 89% of the patients were able to adhere to the plant based no added oil diet which is remarkable and encouraging. Those that adhered had an event rate like a heart attack or bypass operation of <1% while 62% of

the group that did not adhere to the diet suffered recurrent adverse heart events, a huge difference. Food is medicine, and Essy and Ann proved it.

This summer (2014), Dr. Esselstyn invited me and my wife (an RN and certified nutritional counselor) to attend his monthly immersion, where he teaches patients how to eat a diet that reverses heart disease. We met about 25 people, mostly couples, who had traveled from all over to learn from the legendary Essy and Ann.

Dr. Esselstyn lectured on how arteries are injured by standard diets and healed by a plant-based diet with no oil. His talk was as masterful, and as current and detailed, as any university lecture I have ever attended. He then reviewed nearly 30 years of patient results.

Then he turned the mic over to Ann and their daughter Jane. The pair had dozens of grocery items on display, to teach the importance of reading labels to ferret out hidden oils. They showed new food choices that are oil-free, such as the Engine 2 product line.

We ate a delicious lunch of oil-free burritos, soups with kale, sushi rolled in greens, and fruit. The day ended with testimonials by three local patients whose lives had been extended and improved by this program.

Essy and Ann are my heroes, as they have bucked the traditional medical model of *a pill for every ill*, and forgone the stents and bypasses ... instead teaching thousands of people, previously without hope, that a diet change could heal their woes.

The Esselstyns have not received their deserved accolades at the Cleveland Clinic, even though Ann’s father was a founder of the institution. Instead, they have the love and gratitude of thousands of people worldwide, whose lives they have touched.

Although I had met Essy before, and even lectured with him in Detroit years ago, spending the day with these two incredible people fulfilled a long-held dream of mine. Maybe he was Kale-Man, not Spider-Man, but I was thrilled to spend this time with a genuine hero.

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What hero do you want to meet and why?