

## **A New Outlook on Life**

Verna Van Nuland has always led a busy life. She grew up on a farm, raised six kids, taught interior design and flower arranging at Fox Valley Technical College, and started her own home business, Flowers by Verna. Verna knew her lifestyle demanded hard work, but she didn't realize how much her daily routines had become harmful to her health.

"My eating in the past was horrible," Verna admits. "More recently, with all the crazy hours I worked, I was constantly eating on the run."

Verna's lifestyle slowly took a toll on her health. Her wake-up call came in December of 2004 when she was taken to Marshfield Clinic with a condition called Cardiomyopathy, a deterioration of the heart muscle. Doctors there removed 21 pounds of fluid from around her heart and informed her that only one-sixth of her heart was functioning. They estimated she had a year to live.

"I had my funeral plans all made out," Verna recalls. "I wrote a love letter to my kids, grandkids and friends."

Despite these expectations, Verna's prayers were answered when she astonishingly survived longer than doctors had predicted. Unfortunately, she spent the next two years feeling lethargic and constantly fatigued. Her morning shower would leave her too exhausted to do much else and she would sleep away most days.

"I was desperate! I slept more than I was awake," Verna says. "I was putting on weight, and I was concerned about having a stroke. I felt that there was no hope for me. Then, I visited Dr. Kay Theyerl at ThedaCare."

Dr. Theyerl practices at ThedaCare Physicians – Internal Medicine in Neenah. "I remember clearly the day I met Verna," Dr. Theyerl says of her patient. "She was discouraged and distraught regarding her health issues. She was 100 pounds overweight, had high blood pressure, chest pain and shortness of breath, and was teary with frustration."

After meeting Verna and reviewing her medical history, Dr. Theyerl quickly recommended that she join the Coronary Health Improvement Project, or CHIP, which is sponsored in the Appleton community by Ingenuity First, a division of ThedaCare.

## **A Program of Hope**

CHIP is a series of 16 two-hour classes designed to help attendees understand their health risk factors and teach them lifestyle choices that can dramatically reduce risk of coronary disease.

The program gives individuals the information they need to make decisions about improved eating habits, lifestyle and health. It promotes eating foods like fruits,

vegetables, whole grains and legumes, as they are grown. It encourages people to reduce their fat intake to less than 20 percent, and to reduce their sodium intake by reducing the amount of processed foods they eat. It also promotes physical activity.

People who participate in the CHIP program receive:

- Two health screenings for total cholesterol, LDL, HDL, triglycerides and fasting blood sugar
- Two lifestyle evaluations
- Dynamic Living textbook and workbook
- Food demonstrations and samples

More than 40,000 CHIP graduates nation-wide, and 165 in the valley, have substantially lowered their blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol, and have reduced symptoms of heartburn, angina and depression. CHIP also can help reverse narrowed arteries.

### **Dramatic Turnaround**

By the time of Verna's visit with Dr. Theyerl, the CHIP program at ThedaCare was into its fourth class session. Verna's prayers were answered a second time when she discovered there was room for one more person. Verna immediately took Dr. Theyerl's advice and registered to attend the class, beginning that same night.

Thanks to her involvement in CHIP, Verna has made dramatic changes in her lifestyle and her eating habits. She has been following the CHIP program, and now eats fresh fruit and vegetables regularly, and rice and beans have replaced most of her dairy products and meat.

She sits down to eat meals now and even keeps track of her foods in a log.

Verna also is more conscious of making time to exercise. As a result of her new approach, Verna has lost almost 70 pounds and has improved her quality of life. The CHIP program and exercise go hand-in-hand, according to Verna. This summer, just over a year after joining the program, Verna completed a 25-mile bike ride.

"Why wouldn't someone want to go through CHIP?" Verna asks now. "I feel like a new person! The CHIP program gave me my life back. I so love the people in CHIP. I feel better and have tons of energy, which I never had since I got sick."

"When Verna returned to see me three months after our first visit, she was 35 pounds lighter, carrying a box of garden-fresh vegetables and fruit, and crying tears of joy," Dr. Theyerl recalls.

Verna also experienced an amazing change in her required medications. Prior to joining CHIP, she took seven different medications and relied on an oxygen tank. Now, she has eliminated her need for several medications and has cut other prescription amounts in half. She no longer needs her oxygen at night. The reduction in medication and the elimination of her oxygen has resulted in phenomenal cost savings for Verna, too.

“When I got my oxygen tank, they told me I wouldn’t be able to go off of it since I was in really bad shape,” Verna says. “After CHIP, I insisted they test me to see if I still needed it. I didn’t! When they came to get my oxygen tank back, I asked if it was common to pick up machines after people were on them. They said only very seldom does it happen.”

Verna remains active with CHIP as a program facilitator. “I want to help others who are where I was. I want to let them know that if I can do it, so can they. That is such an emotional time in a person’s life, and most people don’t know where to turn. I am so honored to be involved in facilitating the CHIP class now.”

“Verna has made an incredible transformation,” says Dr. Theyerl. “She truly is an inspiration --- for me and for my patients, especially those struggling to make lifestyle changes. Verna is a great resource, offering to speak with my patients to provide information and support. I am so proud of her. She is healthier and has a renewed passion for life — what could be better?”

Looking back on her recovery, Verna says, “It’s God; it’s Dr. Kay Theyerl. Without them, I don’t know where I’d be. It’s a total miracle.”