A Message from the American Heart Association’s CEO, Nancy Brown

An NFL Coach uses his CPR training to help save a young boy’s life

Twin sisters share a rare heart condition

Cor Vitae Society members create nationwide impact
As the American Heart Association embarks on its Second Century, I am filled with excitement and hope for the future of our mission. Since 1924 we have been dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke, investing in groundbreaking science, changing public policy to support healthy communities, and helping people around the globe live longer, healthier lives.

Together with our staff, volunteers, supporters and partners I am confident we will make an even greater impact in the next hundred years and beyond.

In this issue of The Pulse, you’ll hear about how we’re creating lasting change in Los Angeles through the efforts of the Will and Helen Webster Foundation, you’ll meet a pair of twin sisters with identical heart conditions, and hear from Cor Vitae Society member, Dan Shimer, who empowered millions of people to take charge of their health and prioritize mental well-being with help from an Instagram influencer.

We are continually exploring new ways to reach more people with our life-saving message, and that includes this publication. I am thrilled to share with you some exciting changes to The Pulse coming up in our February 2024 issue. We’ll be featuring more in-depth lifestyle profiles, as well as stories about the high-impact efforts of the Association in your local communities. We excited to provide you with a comprehensive view of all the ways your support is fueling our mission and a publication you’ll be proud to share with others.

Together, we are making a real difference in the lives of millions of people and families affected by heart disease and stroke. Your heartfelt commitment to our cause inspires us every day, and we are honored to have you as partners in powering a healthier future for all.

NANCY BROWN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

LEADERSHIP LETTER

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Heart.org/Nation
12 days after learning about CPR and AEDs, an NFL coach used his knowledge to help save a life

On the first Monday night of 2023, Raheem Morris, Los Angeles Rams Defensive Coordinator, was working at home and keeping an eye on the Bills-Bengals game. He saw Bills Safety Damar Hamlin make a routine tackle, stand up, then collapse. The then-24-year-old’s heart had stopped beating.

The chain of survival played out perfectly. Hamlin received immediate, high-quality CPR, keeping blood and oxygen flowing, and a defibrillator was used to jolt his heart back into a sustainable rhythm. He’s made a full recovery, even returning to practice.

At the time, though, everyone watching was confused and, most of all, frightened. Including Raheem. The rest of the week, nearly every conversation at Rams headquarters revolved around Hamlin. Players and coaches feared their own mortality. “We had to find ways to give everyone peace of mind,” Raheem said. Reggie Scott, the team’s head athletic trainer, came up with one.

Scott suggested that the club offer training in CPR and how to use an AED (automated external defibrillator). Raheem was so enthused that he told Scott the entire defensive staff would be attending. Before the training could even take place, the NFL world was rocked again by the drowning death of the 2-year-old daughter of Tampa Bay Buccaneers linebacker Shaquil Barrett.

More inspired than ever, on a mid-May afternoon, the defensive coaches went through the session at team headquarters. When they finished, the offensive coaches took their place. Turnout and motivation was high.

Less than two weeks after the team’s CPR and AED training, it was Memorial Day weekend and Raheem was in Las Vegas with his wife, Nicole, and three children. As the kids splashed around in the pool, Raheem settled into a lounge chair. He ordered a drink. But before it even arrived, something happened that altered the lives of many people.

One of those people was Joe Stanley, who was also poolside that day in Vegas when his 7-year-old son came running up to him with an urgent message: “Wyatt! Wyatt! He’s under the water!” Joe dove in and found his 3-year-old son face down at the bottom. Joe grabbed Wyatt, swam to the surface and screamed for help. About 15 yards away, Raheem turned to look. His eyes immediately landed on Wyatt’s deep blue skin. As Raheem rushed over, his recent training kicked in.

Step 1: Call 911. He saw plenty of people doing that.

Step 2: Start CPR. He told the lifeguard to do that, then moved to step 3.

“Where’s the AED?” he asked her.

Raheem ran to the pool check-in area where the AED was, grabbed it and ran back, all the while thinking he’d need to take over chest compressions upon his return. So, he rehearsed the steps in his mind: Hands in the center of the chest. Push down on the sternum. Keep pressing to the pace of the song “Stayin’ Alive.”

Then he got to Wyatt and the lifeguard wasn’t performing CPR. It was Dr. Andrew Oleksyn, an emergency room physician. Oleksyn stopped compressing, cradled Wyatt’s head and in a calm tone said to Raheem: “There’s no pulse. We need to use the AED.”
Raheem and Oleksyn got the pads connected and placed on Wyatt. The machine recommended delivering an electric shock. They did, hoping it would restore the rhythm that had gone out in the boy’s heart. Wyatt belched some water, then some food. His heart was working. Raheem jumped up and began moving pool chairs and other equipment to clear a path for paramedics. When they arrived and placed Wyatt on a gurney, the boy started to cry. “Hearing that was the biggest relief ever,” Raheem said.

Once Wyatt was headed to the hospital, Raheem began processing everything. First, he called to thank Scott, the Rams athletic trainer, for the CPR and AED training. Next, he called Rams head coach Sean McVay. “How fortunate was it that we did the training?” Raheem told him. “I wasn’t just a bystander. I was actually able to be helpful.” Wyatt traveled home with his family days later. “Truly a miracle,” his mother, Kelseigh Stanley, told “Good Morning America” during a segment that included a reunion of her family, Raheem and Oleksyn. The odds certainly were against Wyatt. Less than half of all people who need CPR from bystanders receive it before help arrives. But having a bystander perform CPR doubles or triples the chances of survival.

Playing defense is all about assessing what’s happening, figuring out how to thwart it and then doing it. With a child’s life on the line, that’s exactly what Raheem did. “You hate to put something like this in football terms, but there was a similarity,” Raheem said. “If you’re a play-caller, you have to ignore the stadium noise around you to sit in calm, conscious thought and make the play call.”

At the pool, it was the same thing. Turn off the noise, stay calm and focus on the task at hand.”

Since helping save Wyatt, Raheem has bought an AED for his house and another for his lake house. “I’m shocked they’re not more readily available,” he said. “Lots of high schools don’t have them. They should be as common as fire extinguishers.”

Nicole is getting into the life-saving spirit, too. She’s organizing a CPR and AED training class for the wives of Rams coaches.

“How many more people can we save?” Raheem said. ■

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Beat the heat with foods that keep you hydrated

Staying hydrated can help you live a longer, healthier life. Though it has no calories, water plays a vital role in keeping people healthy. It prevents dehydration, helps rid the body of waste products, lubricates joints, protects the spinal cord, helps to keep body temperature in the normal range, helps manage body weight and can help reduce calories when substituted for sweetened beverages such as soda or iced tea.

The National Academy of Medicine recommends men consume 13 8-ounce glasses of water per day and women consume nine, more if they are pregnant or breastfeeding. Dehydration occurs when people don’t consume enough, and symptoms may appear with a water deficit as low as 2% under the recommended amount. Symptoms may include fatigue, confusion or short-term memory loss and mood changes such as irritability or depression.

But drinking multiple glasses of water throughout the day isn’t for everyone. Health experts say that’s OK.

While fluids are important, hydration doesn’t just come in a bottle or from the tap. In fact, at least 19% of a U.S. adult’s water intake typically comes from water-rich foods. And they’re not hard to find.

A lot of foods are high in water content, especially fruits and vegetables. Eating these foods is a way of helping to maintain good hydration status.

When looking for water-rich foods, head straight to the produce department and aim for fruits and vegetables that contain at least 85% water. Cucumbers top the list, at about 95% water. They’re also low in calories while high in fiber and vitamins K and A.

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Sip a smoothie!

When you’re in the mood for something sweet or need an afternoon energy boost and plain water just won’t cut it, skip the coffee and soda and try a budget-friendly homemade smoothie! Blend frozen fruits and veggies with plain, low-fat yogurt, milk or water.

Get recipe ideas at Recipes.Heart.org.
**SURVIVOR SPOTLIGHT**

**Twin sisters learn they have the same rare heart condition**

As identical twins, Amy and Erica are used to doing a lot of things together. As one might expect, this included the usual staged photoshoots wearing matching outfits, sharing a room through their teenage years, and playing on the same soccer team. They even chose to attend the same college together.

When Erica transferred schools for a starting goalkeeper position on the soccer team, Amy joined the following semester and together they led the team to the Elite 8 of the National Championships. Now at the age of 40, they still live within a few miles of each other, but have lived very different adult lives. Erica joined the military and pursued her doctorate as a physical therapist, while Amy built a career in communications and is married with a young daughter. They may have thought their days of sharing things were over until they recently found out that they had one more identical trait, a balloon-like bulge in the aorta called an ascending aortic aneurysm, a condition their mother also suffered from around their age due to a congenital condition known as bicuspid aortic valve.

Although they have a diagnosis now, it was a long road for Erica and Amy to find out about their condition, and they are a powerful example of the importance of listening to one’s body and being a patient advocate. “The only reason we got here is because we didn’t stop advocating for ourselves, when we thought there was something more that needed to be figured out,” Erica said.

Although Erica was a finely tuned athlete, powerlifting, running marathons and half-marathons throughout her adult life, she frequently felt heart palpitations. Numerous exams and visits with different cardiologists, who were sometimes dismissive due to her age and fitness level, always resulted in more questions. She underwent a battery of tests, each coming back with unremarkable results. “With my mom’s history, I knew something was wrong, something that made me feel unsafe, something big,” she said. One of her cardiologists ordered Holter monitors – a small, wearable device that records the heart’s rhythm – for Erica to wear over a period of two weeks. Because this happened to coincide with a long-distance running adventure race she had planned on entering, she decided to wait to wear it until after the race. “The rest of the week after the race was the scariest because I was having so many heart palpitations, I thought I was dying. The one comforting fact was I was wearing the monitor and I knew someone was paying attention to my heart,” she said.

Erica’s Holter monitor recorded ventricular tachycardia (V-tach), a heart rhythm problem caused by irregular electrical signals in the lower chambers of the heart. Follow-up testing revealed, and was able to measure, the aneurysm in her aorta which could potentially grow to be life threatening. Even though previous tests had indicated otherwise, this new information led doctors to believe she had inherited the same bicuspid valve as her mother. Armed with that information and the likelihood that she would also be affected, Amy went to undergo tests of her own. Even though her symptoms were milder than Erica’s, her scans showed an aneurysm as well. Amy says that the diagnosis comes as vindication to decades of curiosity and dismissal. “We were told that our hearts were strong, and everything was fine, and to just try to stay as healthy as possible,” she said.

Amy feels lucky to have had her twin sister help her find out about her own condition. “Erica has a research-oriented brain plus medical knowledge and training which allowed her to chase down her symptoms. Now we’re both fighting the same battle, and I’m very fortunate to be going through this with her.”

Erica and Amy feel their story highlights the importance of knowing your family history, the continuing need for more research, and more general awareness around patient advocacy so that people don’t have to struggle for years trying to understand their own hearts and their own body.

The twins think it’s remarkable that they are already seeing and benefiting from advancements in cardiovascular science made even since their mom had her heart procedures several decades ago. “And we know the American Heart Association is working every day to find better ways to treat conditions like ours,” Amy said. “It’s research that will one day benefit hearts just like my daughter’s.”

**What is Aortic Aneurysm?**

The aorta is the main blood vessel that carries blood away from your heart and to your body. It is shaped like a walking cane with a curved handle. An ascending aortic aneurysm is an abnormal bulging and weakening in your aorta at the point before the curve.

**What is a Bicuspid Aortic Valve?**

The term bicuspid aortic valve refers to the leaflets of the aortic valve. This is the valve that leads out of the heart to the aorta, the big blood vessel that delivers oxygen-rich blood to the body. Normally, the aortic valve has three leaflets. A bicuspid valve has only two leaflets. Because of this, patients with a bicuspid valve may develop a narrowing or leakage of the aortic valve.
Learning to save lives can start as early as age 4

A new scientific statement outlines best practices for building skills over time so kids can become lifesavers by middle school

Building the skills for CPR can begin as early as age 4 and layer on as children get older, so that by age 10 they may be able to perform effective chest compressions on training manikins, according to a new scientific statement from ILCOR, the American Heart Association and the European Resuscitation Council, published recently in the American Heart Association’s flagship, peer-reviewed journal Circulation.

According to the statement, even if children are too young or small to perform an effective chest compression, they may begin learning the steps and rhythm for proper CPR and begin to learn about AEDs. Research has shown impactful results in the amplification of community preparedness as school-aged children share what they are learning with their families, friends and neighbors.

In addition to what may be done in schools, families should have a cardiac emergency response plan in place.

“Given that most cardiac arrests outside of a hospital will happen at home, it’s important that all members of the family understand what to do if someone has a cardiac arrest,” said Comilla Sasson, M.D., Ph.D., FAHA, a member of the statement writing committee, practicing emergency medicine physician and vice president for science and innovation at the American Heart Association.

“Building skills at a young age that are reinforced consistently throughout their years in school has the potential to educate generations of students and their parents on how to respond to cardiac arrest, perform chest compressions and rescue breaths, use an AED and ultimately increase survival.”

Make a Family Response Plan

Make a plan within the household, and practice regularly by delegating the steps below:

- Who will call 911? Use a cell phone. Put the phone on speaker while talking with the emergency dispatcher and starting CPR.
- Who will start CPR? Start performing Hands-Only CPR immediately.
- Who will open the door? Make sure your entrance is unlocked; giving first responders easy access to your residence.

You could say that healing hearts runs in Rich Webster’s family. His father, Will W. Webster Jr., was the founder of Webster Laboratories in California which engineered and manufactured cardiac catheters and related equipment. Rich began working with his dad at a young age and did so until graduating from college. After several years in the financial industry, Rich resumed working with his father’s company at age 29.

It was then that the company’s president introduced Rich to the American Heart Association. Rich said, “I was surprised by the breadth of the AHA and everything that they are able to do. I knew they were laser focused on heart health but didn’t realize how many ways they are helping.”

Rich now serves as the Co-President and Board Member at the Helen and Will Webster Foundation, named after his parents, and helps guide the Foundation’s philanthropic work in the home city of Los Angeles and beyond. Rich believes that one of the biggest problems in Los Angeles is the combination of nutrition insecurity and food deserts.

Food security means having enough food and not having to choose between food and other basic needs. Nutrition security builds on that. It means getting enough healthy food consistently and putting that food to best use — not only what to eat, but where to find it and how to prepare it. The COVID-19 pandemic increased awareness of the problem and its disproportionate impact on under-resourced communities. The American Heart Association — and Rich — believes in the right to healthy food for all people to live their best lives.

To help address this ongoing issue, the foundation funded the American Heart Association’s Social Impact Funds in 2021 with a gift of $1 million, another gift of $1 million the following year, and $4 million in March of 2023, making the foundation the largest Social Impact Funds donor in the American Heart Association’s history. This most recent round of funding is part of a multi-year commitment from Rich Webster and the Helen and Will Webster Foundation. This deepened support has established the Helen and Will Webster Foundation Fund to further advance the need for innovative social enterprises to build sustainable growth and impact.

“I want to be a part of the solution. If we can eliminate or even limit some of those problems, it would have a huge impact on health equity and outcomes for generations,” Rich said. “You have to treat it like a venture fund, it’s not just starting an initiative in a city, it’s getting them to be self-sustaining. It’s all about sustainable change, and the American Heart Association has the programs and the personnel on the ground to see the problems from all angles and make an effective difference in health equity. It’s a blessing to be able to do this, and it’s incredibly fulfilling to see the results of this work.”
Dan Shimer | Dallas, Texas

Dan Shimer believes in results. With a successful career in finance, mergers and acquisitions under his belt including running his own capital firm, it’s clear that he knows a sound investment when he sees it. However, it wasn’t until 2016, when a cardiac catheterization saw 50% blockage in his left anterior descending artery, also known as the “widow maker,” that he started to apply this philosophy to investing in his own health as well.

“My doctor said you need to change your lifestyle, and I started to clean up my act pretty quick. I hit the treadmill to keep me moving, I eat heart healthy foods at every meal, because it’s all about buying more time,” he said. He is no stranger to how devastating the effects of heart health can be, losing both parents to heart disease. Dan credits playing oboe and other wind instruments for keeping him from smoking like the rest of his family. “Back in the 60’s I was eating hamburgers like everyone else, but that was the one habit that I never picked up,” he said. Dan’s wife Diane also lost her mother to heart disease, and both her mother’s older brother and older sister to heart attacks.

Dan admits that during his career he became accustomed to the level of stress in his life without realizing the potential effects it would have. “I’m your typical Type A guy that’s pretty much all business. I was in finance, so I was working until 9:00 every night, and yeah, I handled the stress but probably not in the best ways. It was a difficult adjustment to suddenly turn that faucet off,” he said of retiring. “When you stop doing that, it gives you a chance to find the balance in your life, and I decided that I wanted to use that extra time and energy to try to focus on making things better for other people.”

Dan sat on the board of a small business with friend Ron Haddock, and realized they shared very similar personal and family histories with heart disease. Ron was already a supporter of the American Heart Association and encouraged Dan to get involved.

“We wanted to help and make a difference,” Dan said, “but wanted to focus solely on preventable activities. Diane and I want to keep people from going through what we went through – losing family members – and we’re blessed to be in the position to do that. We’re involved in a lot of charitable organizations, but we like being able to see the results of what we’re investing in.”

When the Association approached Dan with an idea to help with a campaign aimed directly at preventative education and actionable measures featuring Instagram influencer Tika Sumpter, he was all for it.

Tika Sumpter is best known for her roles in Mixed-ish, Tyler Perry’s The Have and Have Nots, and as Maddie Wachowski in the movie Sonic the Hedgehog, but she’s also a mental health advocate, podcaster and founder of The Sugaberry multimedia network. She’s built an incredible and engaged audience on social media with almost two million followers.

“We were in a situation where we could make a large contribution, and I said let’s sit down and talk about how we can spend it. Maybe it’s just a seed where we start something that’s going to grow,” he said, “but it has to be measurable, so we can go back and say, ‘that’s what we did, how can we double or triple it?’”

Working with the AHA on the “It’s My Time” campaign funded by supporters like Dan, Tika helped produce and disseminate social media content focused on the links between mental health, heart health, and overall well-being and the small actions that people can take to decrease their stress and increase their overall health. The campaign included public service announcements and interviews with E! Online and Yahoo Life to reach hundreds of millions of people over the course of several months. Dan was certainly happy with these results, and how his support was driving awareness forward.

When asked what he’d most like to see accomplished in the future as the American Heart Association moves into their Second Century, the resounding answer was a focus on earlier preventative education.

“We need to do better about teaching people food and nutrition at a very basic level so people can understand how those basic choices affect their health, and how the risks they are taking will create problems for them in the future. I’m hoping that we’ll be able to continue down this path and really make an impact down the road.”

Dan and Diane Shimer
American Heart Association and launch the Elizabeth Elting Social Impact Fund with a $5 million investment. In its first five years, the fund will apply a targeted investment strategy to engage social enterprises led by women and women of color. I’m so humbled and thrilled to be able to support another crop of social entrepreneurs doing such profound work. Together, we can make health equity a reality.”

Although the idea of eliminating social determinants of health seems more like a dream than reality, in her new book hitting shelves this summer, Dream Big and Win, she talks about how to help channel one’s passion into purpose through a practical and entrepreneurial mindset.

She says that “hopes and dreams are great, and they’re vital, but they’re not enough on their own. Without a plan, a roadmap outlining where you’re going and how you’ll get there, along with the follow-through to make it happen, hopes and dreams will only ever be hopes and dreams. Success may not be a guarantee, but if we can create a solid plan of how to give people longer, healthier lives and take those first steps, we’re a lot more likely to get where we want to be.”

If you’re lucky enough to sit down and speak with Liz Elting, you’re going to stand up inspired. Liz dreamed up TransPerfect—the world’s largest language solutions company—out of an NYU dorm room in 1992 and has been featured as one of Forbes’ Richest Self-Made Women every year since the list’s inception.

Among her many other impressive accolades, she earned American Heart Association’s Woman Changing the World Award in 2022 and Health Equity Leadership Award in 2020 for the work she does through her Elizabeth Elting Foundation to break down systemic barriers, bridge gaps, and foster change for women and other underserved communities.

“It’s extremely fulfilling work that I’m immensely grateful to play a part in,” she said. “Our mission is to lift people up through a wide range of initiatives—from business and education to venture funds, scholarships, public health, and access to healthy food. Social determinants of health rob the futures of women and people from underserved communities across the U.S., where your zip code, your race, and your gender all impact your life expectancy. Everyone has the right to reach their full potential, succeed, and be independent, and when I see a gap in need of bridging, I get to building.”

This was illustrated most clearly by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it affected different communities. In the first year of the pandemic, death rates were elevated in lower income neighborhoods and communities of color. This is the result of longstanding systemic injustices and social inequities that are also determinants of health (things like access to safe housing, nutritious food, education, health insurance, quality medical care, paid sick leave, and so forth).

The other thing that the pandemic statistics show us is that investments into communities work, and that’s where Elting got to building. In 2018, she created the Elizabeth Elting Foundation to promote health, education and gender equality, especially for those from under-resourced populations. Believing in the power of social entrepreneurship, she was drawn to the American Heart Association’s Social Impact Funds, which reimagine the approach to community transformation to combat the social determinants of health, investing in local entrepreneurs to solve these issues. They seek to provide capital access for community-led solutions with the goal of generating long-term positive health outcomes.

In 2020, The Elizabeth Elting Foundation contributed $1 million to support the creation of the Bernard J. Tyson Impact Fund - a named fund of the American Heart Association’s Social Impact Funds – which allowed seven critical organizations, all led by women of color, to both create change within their communities and leverage the initial investment for follow-on funding, allowing them to continue and expand. And that was just the beginning. She said, “I could see how impactful these investments were and it inspired me to team up with the American Heart Association.
Over the last quarter-century, the American Stroke Association has continually proven that an association in motion stays in motion. The organization’s more recent achievements include:

- The launch of the open-access journal Stroke: Vascular and Interventional Neurology.
- A new research network on hemorrhagic stroke and an innovative collaboration to help reduce stroke disability and death rates in the southeastern U.S.
- The first international stroke center certification.
- A Thrombectomy-Capable Stroke Center certification, in collaboration with the Joint Commission.
- Phase III of Target: Stroke, setting more aggressive targets for timely treatment with alteplase as well as targets for prompt treatment with endovascular therapy.
- Expansion of the Get With The Guidelines® quality improvement initiative to address hemorrhagic stroke. More than 3,600 hospitals have participated in Get With The Guidelines–Stroke since the program was launched with pilot testing in 24 hospitals in 2001.