



American  
Heart  
Association.

Cor Vitae  
*Society*

# The Pulse

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President*

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# PRESIDENT'S LETTER

As we reflect on a year that tested our resolve and exposed health disparities and racial injustices, we remain relentless in our pursuit to help people everywhere live longer, healthier lives. Our work ahead demands both leadership and hope and, thankfully, I see an abundance of both.

Having dedicated nearly 20 years to serving the American Heart Association, I consider myself a lifetime volunteer. It is my honor as president to help steer the organization through the evolving health care landscape. I can confidently say the Association is meeting the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will continue to respond with ingenuity, innovation and integrity.

We funded and fast-tracked research on how COVID-19 affects the heart and brain and stood up the COVID-19 CVD Registry to inform treatments and improve quality of care. We provided essential training to front-line health care workers, advocated for federal pandemic relief and responded to community needs. We also stepped up our investments in locally-led solutions to increase health equity.

Meanwhile, we are unyielding in our lifesaving work to eradicate heart disease and stroke. Your unwavering, generous support powers our mission.

As only the second neurologist to lead the Association, I am eager to expand our sphere of influence in brain health, which has interesting and complex relationships to cardiovascular disease. I hope to engage more neuroscientists, both basic and clinical, in the Association family.

I'm particularly excited about the science and research revealed at this year's Scientific Sessions held Nov. 13-17, which convened scientists from all over the world to share the latest discoveries through 500 educational seminars.

The Cor Vitae Society is a vital link to the future of science and the American Heart Association.

Thank you for being a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives.



**Mitchell S.V. Elkind, M.D., M.S.,  
FAAN, FAHA**  
*President*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mitchell S.V. Elkind' with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Mitchell S.V. Elkind, M.D., M.S., FAAN, FAHA**

President

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# SURVIVOR SPOTLIGHT

## Stroke at 39 fuels 'Nurse Knuckles' to transform career

**B**ecause of her last name, Donulaé Knuckles has long answered to "Nurse Knuckles." And the name fits equally as well because of her grit and determination.



*Donulaé Knuckles*

"Nursing is holistic work; it addresses the body, the mind, the soul and the spirit," Knuckles said. "And I am fueled by that."

Over the past 23 years, Knuckles has worked in cardiology, women's health, public health, nursing education, home care and case management. She also started a company that offers CPR, first aid and AED training.

Over that long career, Knuckles has educated many women about the signs and symptoms of stroke.

Then, she had one.

After a long day at work in 2014, Knuckles — 39 at the time — came home and experienced sudden visual changes. She felt like her mouth was going numb; she had just put a lollipop in her mouth from her children's leftover Halloween candy and wondered if it had been poisoned. She asked her daughter, then 11, to call 911.

"I felt my life slipping away," Knuckles said. "I knew that if I didn't get help right away, I would die."

It wasn't until she was in the emergency room that she realized she'd had a stroke. "Doctors didn't understand why, because I didn't have uncontrolled hypertension, diabetes or any of the risk factors."

An echocardiogram revealed that she had patent foramen ovale, a congenital condition in which a hole or opening is between the upper chambers of the heart. The most likely reason for her stroke was that a clot crossed the opening and traveled to her brain, said pediatric cardiologist Dr. Tom Forbes, who later performed the surgery to close the hole.

At first, Knuckles said she felt ashamed about her

stroke. That changed when a fellow nurse invited her to attend a local stroke camp. There, Knuckles shared her story with other survivors and realized the impact she could have.

"I left there saying, 'I'm a stroke survivor, and it's OK!'" she said.

Concerned the stroke camp's registration fee would prevent others from attending, Knuckles soon founded Love Yourself for Life, which celebrates American Heart Month in February with an annual fundraiser to pay the registration fees for stroke survivors, their family members and caregivers.

Knuckles is working on a doctorate in nursing, which she hopes to use to reduce health disparities and help nurses have a greater voice in public policy and health communication.

"I don't see enough nurses in political positions where they can make a real impact on the communities they are serving," she said.



*Donulaé Knuckles at a Go Red for Women event at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.*

The AHA invited Knuckles to the state capital, where she shared her story with Michigan lawmakers. Later, she teamed with a state senator to designate May as Stroke Awareness Month in Michigan.

"My purpose in life is being fulfilled," Knuckles said. "I am so grateful for how my life is unfolding; the best is yet to come." ■

[Read the full story](#)

## What stress does to the body and how to beat it

From daily struggles such as work pressure to traumatic events such as the death of a loved one, everyone has felt some form of stress.

Emotional and mental strain can leave us more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, heart disease, high blood pressure, heart failure, gastrointestinal trouble and other problems.

“The impact of stress on the body can be acute or chronic, and it can happen suddenly or be exerted in a low-grade fashion over time,” said Dr. Ernesto Schiffrin, physician-in-chief in the Department of Medicine at Jewish General Hospital in Montreal.



[Learn more about the consequence of stress and how to manage it.](#)

Schiffrin described stress in general terms as “aggression against the body,” which could be coming from within — such as a disease or ailment — or from your environment. When the body feels attacked, it activates the “fight-or-flight” reaction, releasing adrenaline and increasing cortisol levels. Excess exposure to these hormones can affect just about every system in the body.

“After an acute stressor ends, the levels usually return to normal,” said Dr. Sherita Hill Golden, professor of medicine and epidemiology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. “But if they remain elevated, the body can become more resistant to insulin, leading to heart disease and diabetes. Insulin resistance also can make the body more prone to inflammation and lead to damaged blood vessels.”

Fortunately, you can manage stress in multiple ways, even with restrictions and life changes brought on by the coronavirus. You can:

- **Exercise.** Being active creates a natural high and can help combat negative feelings and relieve stress, tension, anxiety and depression.
- **Maintain social connections.** Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you’re feeling.
- **Make time to unwind.** Take part in activities that bring you joy and explore new hobbies.
- **Limit news intake.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends taking breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories that address issues about the pandemic.
- **Get enough sleep.** Given the change in schedules and routines, it may help to establish a new bedtime routine and stay as close to it as you can daily.

“If it becomes debilitating or turns into extreme anxiety or depression, it’s worth talking to your doctor to see if you could benefit from counseling and medications to treat it,” Golden said. “Stress really does adversely impact health. The mind-body connection is very important.” ■

[Read the full story](#)

*This article was developed by the American Heart Association with financial support from Transamerica.*

# CONNECT WITH THE CEO

## Connect with the CEO

The American Heart Association hosts Connect with the CEO, a digital series that features a conversation with AHA CEO Nancy Brown and a Q&A session.

The events, scheduled to cover relevant and late-breaking content, also include thought leaders, scientists, physicians, business experts and social justice champions who inform and engage AHA stakeholders in key issues, programs, research and more.

The events have featured highly relevant topics such as urgent response questions related to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the future of health and social entrepreneurs improving health equity.

Interested in signing up for future events or asking questions? Please visit [heart.org/ConnectNow](https://heart.org/ConnectNow) or email [AskAHA@heart.org](mailto:AskAHA@heart.org). Attendees are encouraged to submit questions before or during the livestream. ■



*"This is a great discussion that showcases how tech and dedicated professionals are adapting to and enhancing the delivery of health care. Proud to be an AHA volunteer."*  
– Hank Wasiak, Champion's Circle,  
Palm Springs, California

*"Outstanding program — keep up the great work!"* – Barry Greene, President's Circle,  
Boston, Massachusetts

**Nancy Brown**  
Chief Executive Officer, American Heart Association  
Cor Vitae Society  
Paul Dudley White Legacy Society



Learn more about  
Connect with  
the CEO.

# SOCIETY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

## Brenda and Blairton Hampton | Greensboro, North Carolina

PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE

PAUL DUDLEY WHITE LEGACY SOCIETY



**Brenda and Blairton Hampton**

County Department of Public Health started the Hampton Family Community Health Initiative.

Through its Mobile Teaching Kitchen, the Initiative is providing healthy cooking and eating classes for multicultural residents. It's also educating people on cardiovascular health and wellness.

Recently, the program expanded from Guilford County to all areas within the Triad.

N'Gai Dickerson, the Mobile Teaching Kitchen chef manager who leads the cooking classes, pivoted to address mass food relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. He's partnering with local organizations to cook and deliver meals to nearly 3,000 families each week with Out of the Garden Project, Homegrown Heroes, Wake Forest Baptist Health, Second Harvest Food Bank and UnitedHealthcare partnerships.

"I encourage everyone to share the details of Mobile Teaching Kitchen and community impact with as many people as they can," Blairton said. "I hope that when we shed light on this program, it inspires others to take action, too. We must make sure these efforts are noticed and not lost in the mix — much like winking at a pretty girl in the dark."

The Hamptons also support the Guilford Heart Walk through their family business, Century Products.

Blairton, who is newly retired as CEO, is on the AHA Board of Directors, a Guilford Heart Walk executive leadership team member and Health Equity Think & Action Tank volunteer.

The Hamptons began their relationship with the AHA more than 10 years ago. ■

Brenda and Blairton Hampton are passionate about tackling the lack of healthy foods in under-resourced communities.

That's why they've poured their energy, time and financial resources into an innovative and fun way to help families.

Generously funded by the Hamptons and with the support of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, the American Heart Association and the Public Health Division of Guilford

### About the Paul Dudley White Legacy Society

The Paul Dudley White Legacy Society honors generous donors who include the AHA in their wills, trusts or other estate plans — creating their legacy.

One of the AHA's founders, Dr. White is considered the father of preventative cardiology. He guided President Eisenhower's recovery from a heart attack as his cardiologist.

Dr. White is widely regarded as one of the leading cardiologists of his day and was a prominent advocate of exercise, diet, weight control and preventative medicine. His vision of a world with better research, treatment and education for cardiovascular disease helped the association emerge as a world-renowned leader.

#### Types of Eligible Gifts:

- Will Bequest
- Trust
- Retirement Account
- Donor Advised Fund
- Gift Annuity
- Real Estate
- Life Insurance
- Stocks

To learn more, contact us at [PlannedGiving@heart.org](mailto:PlannedGiving@heart.org).

# SOCIETY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

## Dr. Rajiv Jauhar | Syosset, New York

### CHAMPION'S CIRCLE



*Dr. Rajiv Jauhar*

Even before he began his 15-year involvement with the American Heart Association, heart health was personal for Dr. Rajiv Jauhar.

“A pivotal moment came for me when my 65-year-old mother experienced atypical chest pains that even I did not recognize as heart related,” said Jauhar, chief of cardiology and director of Cardiac Cath Labs for Northwell Health in New York. “When she had a heart attack, we

connected the dots. Two years later, she passed away from heart disease.”

Jauhar honors his mom’s memory by striving to be a “champion for heart health for everyone, especially South Asian communities on Long Island.”

His research shows that South Asians living in the U.S. have a high incidence of heart disease due to lack of physical activity and failure to measure heart-health numbers such as blood pressure and cholesterol.

As a result, he’s spearheading the South Asian Impact Project, which focuses on advancing health equity through advocacy, policy, education, systems and social changes. It supports children’s health, childhood and adult obesity, education and awareness.

It funds an emergency plan in three houses of worship on Long Island and addresses nutritional standards that include AHA guidelines. ■

### South Asian Impact Project

The AHA’s Healthy for Good™ program and the Long Island Steering Committee is helping transform health and improve outcomes on Long Island, New York through the South Asian Impact Project.

The project includes workshops on health equity in multiple congregations across Long Island.

South Asians, the second fastest-growing ethnic group in America, have a higher death rate from heart disease than any other population.

People of South Asian descent, which includes those from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives, have four times the risk of heart disease compared to the general population, and they develop heart disease up to a decade earlier.



*Dr. Rajiv Jauhar, his wife Vandana, daughter Devina and son Varun*

# SOCIETY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

## Jennifer and Mark Sanders | Dallas, Texas

### PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE



**Mark and Jennifer Sanders**

Shortly after welcoming daughter, Bailey, into the world, Jennifer Sanders got shocking news about her own health.

She had cardiomyopathy, a disease that enlarges the heart muscle and makes it harder for the heart to pump blood to the rest of the body. That led to heart failure and a heart damaged beyond repair.

"Mark (Jennifer's husband) and I were nervous about

my transplant, as we had started a family," said Jennifer, who got a transplant at UT Southwestern Medical Center in 1992 in Dallas,

Texas. "Now, it is wild to think that I have been living with my donor heart longer than the heart I was born with."

Though Jennifer and her brother were diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, doctors told them it

wasn't due to genetics. But when their niece, Sydnie, received a pacemaker in her early 20s, the Sanders got their entire family tested for the cardiomyopathy gene.



"Our passion is a personal one," Mark said. "We were directly impacted by the power of the American Heart Association's world-leading research when Jennifer faced the hard reality of a heart transplant 28 years ago, early in our marriage. Now, through our investment in the AHA and genetic testing, we are determined to conquer this obstacle, so Jennifer is the last one — not only in our family, but in every family."

Jennifer and Mark, who started supporting the AHA seven years ago, are co-chairing the 2020 and 2021 Cotes du Coeur in Dallas. Mark is also a member of the Dallas Division Board of Directors. ■

### Understanding Cardiomyopathy

Cardiomyopathy can affect all ages and races, but certain types of the disease are more common in certain groups. For example, dilated cardiomyopathy is more common in African Americans. It's also more prevalent in men. Teens and young adults are more likely to have arrhythmogenic right ventricular dysplasia, a rare type of cardiomyopathy that occurs if the muscle tissue in the right ventricle dies and is replaced with scar tissue.

Factors that can increase your risk for cardiomyopathy include:

- Family history of cardiomyopathy, heart failure or sudden cardiac arrest
- A disease or condition such as coronary heart disease, heart attack or a viral infection that inflames the heart muscle
- Diabetes or other metabolic diseases
- Severe obesity
- Diseases that can damage the heart, such as hemochromatosis, sarcoidosis or amyloidosis
- Long-term alcoholism
- Long-term high blood pressure

[Learn more about cardiomyopathy](#)

# SOCIETY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

## Sherri and Hunt Hawkins | Jacksonville, Florida

### PACESETTER'S CIRCLE



*Hunt and Sherri Hawkins*

After one of his regular afternoon runs, Hunt Hawkins felt ill. So he laid down to rest.

Days later, he woke up in the hospital.

A severe case of endocarditis had destroyed his artificial aortic valve. He needed emergency surgery to replace it — and save his life.

“I have firsthand experience with how vital the work of the American Heart Association is,” Hunt said. “I am so grateful for the research and medical breakthroughs that are funded by the AHA, for without the association funding research for nearly a century, we would not have the lifesaving procedures, medicines and scientific data needed to save lives like my own today.”

To support the AHA’s lifesaving work, Hunt is chairman of the 2020 First Coast Heart Walk and First Coast Board of Directors.

In the past six years, Hunt and his Stein Mart associates have raised more than \$1.5 million to help the AHA fulfill its mission to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives.

“I share my story so others know there is hope and to spread awareness of the need for critical, lifesaving research,” Hunt said. “The Heart Walk is a fun and meaningful way to celebrate heart and stroke survivors, and to raise lifesaving funds and encourage physical activity.”

The Hawkins began supporting the AHA mission six years ago. ■



*Hunt Hawkins proudly walks as a survivor at the First Coast Heart Walk.*

### A different twist on 'stock'ings this year

Many of our donors are using appreciated stock this year to make their charitable gifts. As the end of the year approaches, you may want to consider whether making a gift of stock is right for you!

#### Why make a gift of stock?

- Stock gifts cost less
- Your gift is easy to transfer
- Make direct gifts to the AHA in support of a specific issue or a local event
- Avoid capital gains tax on the sale of stock that has appreciated
- Receive immediate income tax savings from a charitable tax deduction

If you're considering a gift of stock to the association it is quick and convenient to have your questions answered and to get full instructions by filling out our online [Gifts of Stock & Mutual Funds Form](#). To fill out the form please visit [heart.org/stockgifts](http://heart.org/stockgifts) or contact your local staff today.

# MISSION IN ACTION

## This 'citizen of the world' empowers herself and her community

A refugee from Sudan, Noun Abdelaziz and her family lived in Cairo for several years before arriving in San Diego through a United Nations human rights program.

A quick study in English, the then 10-year-old became the official family translator.

"It was good to be in a place where people looked like me," said Abdelaziz, whose family lives in the ethnically diverse City Heights neighborhood. "I think the culture here is really beautiful. We all essentially deal with similar issues."

But even as a child surrounded by other people of color, discrimination was inescapable, she said.

"Even in Egypt, there was colorism, and I knew that people discriminated without anyone really telling me," Abdelaziz said. "I think I internalized it when it comes to beauty and behavior standards. You want to straighten your hair, stay out of the sun, you don't want to seem like an angry Black girl."

At 13, she signed up to volunteer at Nile Sisters Development Initiative, a nonprofit organization with the mission to empower refugee women.

As she got older, Abdelaziz realized wealthier areas had better schools, and she set her sights on going to Scripps Ranch High School, a predominantly white school an hourlong bus ride each way.

Along the way, she did more volunteer work with refugees, including with the United Women of East Africa and the Girl Scouts.

When she was a senior, she joined the Youth Advisory Council for the University of California San Diego's Center for Community Health, where she focused on food policy work and testified before the California Senate to help pass a bill to provide the state's students with application-free nutritious school meals.

"Children shouldn't have to go through so many barriers to access food," said Abdelaziz, who had to fill out an application for school meals after moving to San Diego.



*Only 20, Noun Abdelaziz has years of experience making an impact on her community.*

When the bill passed in 2018, Abdelaziz said it was a tangible reminder that change is always possible.

"If a certain number of people come together to make change, then change can happen," she said. "I learned that from my parents."

Last year, Abdelaziz became the youngest staff member at Jewish Family Service of San Diego, where she is the refugee outreach coordinator. She works on the Breaking Down Barriers program, which aims to destigmatize mental health in under-resourced, diverse communities.

"Noun is deeply committed to advocacy around health and wellness, from physical to mental," said Vanessa Pineda, lead outreach coordinator at Jewish Family Service.

Pineda cited a recent live online discussion that Abdelaziz initiated and led about sexual assault in the African refugee community. Abdelaziz would like to work with refugees internationally, perhaps within the United Nations.

"I see myself as a citizen of the world," she said. "Wherever I go, I make a home. As an immigrant, you learn to redefine the image of home." ■

[Read the full story](#)

## 5 easy ways to keep tabs on heart health

**T**racking a few simple numbers can be a big help in keeping tabs on heart health.

But you need to pay attention to those numbers long before your doctor says they're an urgent concern, said Nicole Spartano, a research assistant professor in the Department of Endocrinology, Diabetes, Nutrition and Weight Management at Boston University School of Medicine.

"Just because you haven't reached whatever threshold is there for the diagnosis doesn't necessarily mean you're in the clear in terms of whatever physiological measure you're tracking," she said.

Blood pressure is particularly crucial, said Dr. Raymond R. Townsend, professor of medicine at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

"There is nothing more important to living longer, and living with a functioning heart and brain, than attending to an elevated blood pressure," he said. "You need to be sure of what your BP numbers are because if you don't measure it, you cannot manage it."

A health care professional can tell you specific targets. But in general, here are some important ones to track:

### Blood pressure

Blood pressure is a measure of the force of your blood as it pushes against blood vessel walls. The American College of Cardiology and American Heart Association define normal blood pressure as a reading of less than 120/80 mmHg. Top number, or systolic, readings of 130-139 or bottom, diastolic, readings of 80-89 mmHg are considered Stage 1 hypertension. Consistent readings of 140/90 mmHg or higher are considered Stage 2 hypertension.

### Blood sugar

Also known as blood glucose, blood sugar comes from the food you eat. In a fasting blood sugar test, readings of 100 to 125 mg/dL are considered prediabetes. That means it's a risk for developing Type 2 diabetes, which can lead to heart disease and stroke. Readings of 126 or higher on more than one occasion are considered diabetes.

### Cholesterol

A blood test will show levels of different types of this waxy, fatlike substance in your blood that's linked to



cardiovascular disease. A doctor can use these results, along with the other numbers, to give a detailed assessment of heart disease risk.

Spartano doesn't recommend using at-home cholesterol tests.

### Body mass index or waist measurement

To measure obesity, if you know your height and weight, you can use an online calculator, such as the one at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

### Sleep

Recent research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found sleeping less than six hours a night or more than nine was associated with poorer cardiovascular health.

Simply tracking can help you initiate healthy changes, Spartano said.

She also emphasized the importance of one more number: 150. That's the minimum weekly number of minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise recommended for adults.

"It seems maybe daunting, but actually the most significant benefit is going from very little to just slightly more activity, and that can be at any intensity level," she said.

Healthy eating also is crucial, Spartano said.

And don't feel frustrated if all of these efforts take time, she said. "Just because you don't see any single one of these numbers changing doesn't mean that you're not improving your health in a different way." ■

[Read the full story](#)



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# Cor Vitae Society

## THE HEART OF LIFE

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## With Thankful Hearts We Celebrate You.

Because of your generous support, people have more moments to laugh to love and to live. We invite you to download a free copy of the Healthy for Good™ Taste of the Holidays Cookbook. We hope some of these heart-healthy recipes become new family favorites! No matter what your holiday season brings, we wish you moments that are heartwarming and bright. Please visit [heart.org/holidays](http://heart.org/holidays) to download your free copy.

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