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Mending Hearts

written by Ann Muder, design by Reagan Coyle

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Alumna helps women with cardiovascular disease through research and participation in the Red Dress Project.

(Above) Tracy Stevens, M.D., '90, clinical associate professor of medicine, medical director for Saint Luke's Hospital's Mid America Heart Institute's Women's Cardiac Center, stands in front of the designer dresses on display at Halls Crown Center as part of the Red Dress Project held by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

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Awomen's clothing store is probably not the place most people would expect to talk with a cardiologist. But at Halls Crown Center, amidst the racks of jackets and skirts, a line of women has formed to talk with Tracy Stevens, M.D., '90, clinical associate professor of medicine, about heart health. Beside her is an exhibit of 14 red dresses, with labels listing America's most prestigious fashion designers, from Vera Wang to Calvin Klein.

The Red Dress Project is the centerpiece of the national "Heart Truth" campaign, an effort by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute to educate women about heart disease. It's a mission that's close to Dr. Stevens' own heart. As medical director for Saint Luke's Hospital's Mid America Heart Institute's Women's Cardiac Center, Dr. Stevens researches how to prevent women's heart disease and educates them about the risks.

"Women still perceive that their number-one health threat is cancer not heart disease," says Dr. Stevens. "One in two women will die of heart disease whereas one in 30 will from breast cancer. We try to show them statistics that more women than men die every year of heart disease. We want to get out the awareness that this is not a man's disease only."

To help promote awareness, Dr. Stevens played an integral role in the "Heart Truth" campaign in September. In addition, she had the opportunity to discuss her research with first lady Laura Bush, who came to Kansas City as a spokesperson for the event.

"I was really excited to play a part in this campaign," says Dr. Stevens. "It brings to the forefront a message that we've been trying to get across to women for years."

The WHISPER Study

Dr. Stevens first became interested in heart health as a physical therapist. From 1984 to 1986, she worked in physical therapy at Saint Luke's Hospital where part of her duties included cardiac rehabilitation. The job sparked her interest in cardiology.

After graduating from the UMKC School of Medicine, she completed a fellowship in cardiology at Mayo Clinic before returning to Saint Luke's Hospital as a cardiologist and UMKC as a faculty member in the Department of Medicine.

While at Saint Luke's, Dr. Stevens noticed that many of her female patients were having heart attacks seemingly without warning. They were just barely middle age, had normal stress tests and had above average levels of HDL, also known as the "good" form of cholesterol. Dr. Stevens says many women with high LDL or "bad" cholesterol levels are not checked for heart disease because they have high HDL that's considered to counterbalance the harmful effects.

To help find a solution, Dr. Stevens started a study entitled WHISPER (Women's Hearts: Ischemic Screening with Proactive Evaluation and



Dr. Stevens met with first lady Laura Bush in September to discuss research in women's heart disease.

Recommendations) in the fall of 2002. The goal of the study is to prevent the progression of coronary artery disease through early detection and risk modification.

So far, 71 women are enrolled in the two-year study. Dr. Stevens plans to enroll 100 women, ages 45 to 65, with no history of coronary artery disease. The women also must have had a normal nuclear stress test in the past six months and at least three of seven risk factors for heart disease: menopause, family history of premature coronary artery disease, nicotine abuse, dyslipidemia, diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension.

At the beginning of the study, the subjects are given a cardiovascular scan, which can detect coronary plaque not found on a nuclear stress test. If plaque is found, the patients work with the Women's Cardiac Center on risk-modification strategies. Dr. Stevens sees the women every six months to assess their status, and they are given another cardio scan after two years.

Preliminary results show that even with high levels of HDL and normal stress tests, women can still be at risk for heart disease. In the first 62 women who enrolled in the study, more than half had plaque in their coronary arteries.

"We think this is surprising that the majority have plaque, yet it's not detected on a stress test," says Dr. Stevens. "We think that now is the time that we can make an impact if we really make sure blood pressure is controlled and all the risk factors are modified."

While the trial is currently funded for two years, Dr. Stevens says she hopes the preliminary results will allow them to apply for more funding so she can continue monitoring her patients at five and 10 years down the road.

"Our hope is that when we do follow-up scans, the plaque will not have progressed because we're staying on top of their risk factors," she says.





Dr. Stevens talks with women at Halls Crown Center about heart disease risk factors and prevention.

Red Dress Project

Last summer, Dr. Stevens learned that the Red Dress Project would make Kansas City its first stop in a nationwide tour. The dresses became a national symbol for women and heart disease when they debuted at the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in New York in February 2003. Since then, the Red Dress Road Tour has been visiting cities across the country to feature the red designer dresses and provide education and screenings.

When the red dresses came to Kansas City in September, Dr. Stevens joined the national campaign by making several appearances during the week-long event. She answered the public's questions about women's health at Halls Crown Center, where the dresses were on display for public viewing. She also gave a presentation to businesswomen at the Central Exchange in Kansas City on how to manage stress.

"Women make over 90 percent of the health decisions for their family, yet they often defer their own," she says. "The easiest thing to cancel on the calendar is something for ourselves. So we talked about the importance of keeping regular checkups on the calendar and not canceling them."

One of the highlights of the event was a visit from the first lady. At Saint Luke's Hospital, Laura Bush met with about 20 heart patients from the Women's Cardiac Center. Mrs. Bush then met with Dr. Stevens about the WHISPER research and the strategy of the Women's Cardiac Center. Also attending the meeting were Dr. Barbara Alving, acting director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, and Marcia McCoy, R.N., director of the Women's Cardiac Center. Mrs. Bush then gave a presentation to an audience of about 250, all dressed in red shirts, sweaters, and dresses.

For at least one woman, the message was lifesaving. The night before the presentation, Joyce Cullen, 54, had a pain between her shoulder blades. The next night, she heard Mrs. Bush's message that women should look after their own health. The following day, the pain intensified, and, remembering the message that women's heart disease symptoms are different, she went to the emergency room at Saint Luke's. After tests, she underwent an angioplasty to open two seriously blocked arteries and had drug-eluting stents placed to keep them both open.

"This patient's life was saved as a direct result of the Heart Truth/Red Dress campaign and the message she heard from first lady Laura Bush," says Dr. Stevens. "That's a pretty impressive impact. It shows we are making a life-saving difference by raising the awareness of the public, and even of physicians, about the unique aspects of women and heart disease."

These efforts to educate the public recently helped Saint Luke's gain national recognition. This February, *Woman's Day* magazine honored the Mid America Heart Institute's Women's Cardiac Center with a "Red Dress Award" for educating women about heart disease. The magazine planned to feature the center in its March issue in an article on heart disease.

Dr. Stevens says she hopes this campaign will continue to encourage women to be proactive in taking care of their cardiovascular health.

"Women need to be aware of the risk factors and stay on top of them," she says. "Keep a blood pressure diary. Ask for a cholesterol profile. The great news is that heart disease can be prevented." ■