







# *Eat Well &* **PROSPER**

*by Missy Sheehan | Photos by Matt Makowski*

MACWell's Healthy Eating Adventure program offers community support, motivation, and resources to help participants transform their diets and their lives.





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For those on the path to improving their lifestyles and eating habits, it can sometimes be a long and lonely journey.

When your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers not only support you, but join you on the road to eating and living healthy, though, it can make a huge difference, according to Elizabeth George, M.D., a family physician in Mercersburg since 1980. “When you’re doing it as a group, you’re sharing ideas, experiences, challenges, successes, and it just works. It’s remarkable,” says Dr. George. “It’s a lot different than going online and trying to find recipes and trying new things on your own.”

That’s the idea behind the Healthy Eating Adventure (HEA) program that Dr. George created in 2010 as part of the Mercersburg Area Council for Wellness (MACWell), a nonprofit organization that encourages physical activity, nutritious eating habits, and a balanced lifestyle among Mercersburg area residents.

The eating habits of local residents are of particular concern to Dr. George, who is board president for MACWell. “I’ve noticed an upswing in obesity and Type 2 diabetes among the people and the youngsters in our community, and that’s going on throughout the country,” she says. Indeed, according to the 2012 Summit Health Community Health Needs Assessment, obesity rates in Franklin County increased consistently between 1996 and 2012, and diabetes is listed as one of the top five preventable conditions. Franklin County also scored poorly in the nutrition department, with nearly 80 percent of adults not eating the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

Seeking a solution that could have a community-wide impact, Dr. George created the HEA program to offer a road map and support network that people in Franklin County and beyond can use to improve their overall health by transforming their eating habits. It starts with a 28-day community-based challenge that’s designed to immerse participants into a lifestyle based on a whole-food, plant-based diet excluding animal-based products and limiting processed foods, fats, sodium, and sugar.



The recipe for this kale  
and blueberry cake can  
be found in *The Prevent  
and Reverse Heart  
Disease Cookbook*.







"It's really incredible the changes that healthy eating can make," Dr. George says. "And this program is different than others in that you kind of take it on all at once. I think for some people that's what works because how you get rid of addictions and old habits is just by banishing them."

### *Creating Community-Wide Change*

Dr. George says she was inspired to start HEA after reading the book *The Engine 2 Diet* by Rip Esselstyn, a former triathlete and firefighter who taught his fellow firefighters how to cook and eat a heart-healthy, whole-food, plant-based diet. In fact, Dr. George liked his approach so much that she invited him to help her create a similar program with a small group in Franklin County; thus, the HEA program was born.

Today, the program offers three 28-day adventures a year at various locations around the county. Each adventure begins with a kick-off event featuring a whole-food and plant-based meal and a presentation by Dr. George to explain how the program works. Each participant then is partnered with a coach and given materials to guide them through the challenge. They also attend a kitchen makeover seminar where they get tips on what to buy at the grocery store, how to read nutritional labels, and how to keep cooking simple.

Throughout each adventure, participants meet weekly for a potluck meal to share their experiences, ask questions, offer support and motivation, and of course, try each other's tasty and nutritious dishes. "It's really amazing to see the creativity in the dishes

that people bring," says Elizabeth Grant, program manager and a coach for HEA. "You can't eat out and have food this good."

Participants measure the physical effects of the diet by getting blood tests to check their total cholesterol, LDL and HDL cholesterol, triglycerides, and glucose levels before they start the adventure, after the 28 days, and six months later. They also have their weight and blood pressure checked. "The empowering aspect of this program is that your dietary choices really do influence your health," says Elizabeth, whose total cholesterol dropped 40 points during her first adventure back in 2013. "And to be able to see that directly is pretty phenomenal for people."

There's no cost to participate in an adventure; participants pay only for the cost of their meals at the kick-off and graduation events, plus any books they purchase for recommended reading. Costs for the health screenings are covered by a grant that HEA received from the Summit Endowment, according to Elizabeth.

### *Eat For Your Health*

HEA participants include people who want to optimize their overall health and fitness, as well as those with medical conditions that can be helped by dietary and lifestyle changes. "Some might be on the verge of having to take medications for conditions such as hypertension, hyperlipidemia, or diabetes," says Dr. George. "Others might be people struggling with their weight or those who've had heart attacks or strokes and don't want another one."



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For BJ Reed, HEA has had a lasting, positive impact on her life. Now an HEA coach and the author of *On Target With Coach BJ*—a cookbook of plant-based vegan recipes—BJ says she had been taking blood pressure medication for 10 years and had been diagnosed as pre-diabetic when she participated in the program’s first adventure back in 2010. “In a short time I was off all the medication, and I still am,” she says. “My objective was never to lose weight—I was never that overweight so much as on the verge—but over the years I’ve lost 30 pounds.”

Elizabeth says she noticed a distinct change in her energy levels during her adventure. “I tend to be a high or low energy kind of person—I’m either going, going, going or just crashed,” she says. “But it gave me more of a balanced energy where I felt like I had enough energy to get me through the day without coming home exhausted and wiped out.”



At the end of each adventure, participants come together one final time to share their experiences over a meal after their graduation ceremony. “It’s amazing to hear people’s stories at the end, because they all feel great, they have great energy, and they’re sleeping better,” Dr. George says. “Some people say they feel less stressed, or, you know, my

indigestion is gone. It’s just incredible.”

The results of the program have been so impressive that the HEA program has been adopted by several other communities including Yuma County, Arizona, and at a senior center near Harrisburg, Pa. HEA offers a Community Adventure Planning Program DVD as a guide to help communities start their own healthy eating adventures. “I think if it works here, it can work anywhere,” Dr. George says.

### *A Lifelong Adventure*

Despite the benefits of HEA’s recommended diet, sticking to it after the 28-day adventure can be an additional challenge for some people. But whether they follow the diet afterward or not, the program is still a valuable learning opportunity. “A lot of people experience success and stick with it,” Dr. George says. “Of course there are others who might fall back into old habits, but you can’t go through the 28 days without really learning how to cook and use spices and make healthy food.”

For BJ, sticking with the whole-food, plant-based diet over the last five years has been easy. “The food is wonderful,” she says. “And I get to eat more than I ever did on any ‘diet,’ because this isn’t a diet. It’s a lifestyle.”

The next Healthy Eating Adventure in Franklin County is being hosted by the Penn National Golf Course Community from mid-January through mid-February 2016.

### *Healthy Eating Adventure*

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Elizabeth George