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Calif. heart center gala raises \$55K

Donations continue to fuel center since launch in 2006

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif. – Health-care professionals and the local community recently joined forces in Santa Clara County to hold an inaugural fundraiser for a non-profit organization devoted to the prevention of heart disease in South Asians.

The South Asian Heart Center's "Scarlet Night – an Affair of the Heart" rallied between 400 and 500 supporters, raising \$55,000 during an evening of celebration and education.

For a \$100 ticket, attendees took in a fashion show, a Bollywood musical presentation and an award-winning, acapella team. The gala took on the moniker "friendraiser" due to its emphasis on education and awareness over monetary investment, said Jaya Padmanabhan, the center's public relations officer.

The center paid close attention to the menu options at the fundraiser. It was a way to introduce the community to heart healthy food using staple Indian ingredients like daal, turmeric and cumin, Padmanabhan said. The hope in doing so was to incite a more open-minded approach to Indian cooking. The gala's menu acted as a platform for showcasing that simple and healthy eating does not have to equate with bland flavor.

Hors d'oeuvres included dhordia chicken kabobs, boneless chicken marinated in a lemon and milk-based sauce. A medley of five lentils, onions, tomatoes and ginger called panchrattan daal served as dinner.

Nancy Bugwadia, the center's dietician, teamed up with local chef Arvind Bharghav from Turmeric restaurant to create the gala's menu. The heart center strategizes around prevention as key to effective strategies to keep heart attack incidents low. She said that about 60 percent of money raised at the gala will go directly into furthering the center's established preventative measures, the topmost priority of which is nutritious eating.

A simple approach to healthy eating is the virtual elimination of sodas, fried foods and even juice drinks, that Bugwadia says are calorie-packed, and leaves a person hungry in a shorter amount of time than eating the corresponding fruit.

The center opened three years ago in conjunction with El Camino Hospital in Mountain View after a disproportionately high number of South Asians coming to the hospital with cardiac issues, specifically heart attacks and coronary artery disease, was noted. The hospital provided the center's space and infrastructure and private donors provided the half million dollars needed to get the hospital up and running. South Asian Heart Center's annual operating costs have held steady at about \$500,000 since it opened.

South Asians comprise only 3 percent of El Camino's patients, but 6 percent of the total number of heart disease patients the hospital sees. "That's what made [the hospital] sit up and take notice," Padmanabhan said.

Padmanabhan joined the center as a client when she reached a point in her life that despite regular workouts, she felt vulnerable to the potential of suffering a heart attack. Women are slightly more prone to developing coronary artery disease than are men, Padmanabhan points out.

Women may be more at risk than men; however, men should not dispel any sense of security involving heart disease, known in the medical community as "the silent killer."

Ashish Mathur, the center's executive director, speaks with academic wisdom and medical authority at the mention of the heart health of South Asians, as well as with the conviction of a man who, seven years ago at the age of 44, nearly became a statistic when he suffered a heart attack. This led to research on the subject and eventually his crusade to meaningfully impact the state of cardiac health among South Asians.

Mathur called his brush with death an "ideal as a purpose for me to lead the center and make as many people aware of this problem as possible." He recalls his doctor telling his wife he is lucky to have survived.



Ashish Mathur, executive director of the South Asian Heart Center in Mountain View, Calif., had his own brush with heart trouble seven years ago. He now leads the center in preventing heart attacks in the South Asian community.

Amid all that is known about heart disease and cardiac health, Mathur says he is amazed at a lack of awareness of the cardiac stress toward which South Asians are genetically predisposed.

While Mathur admits that the mechanics of reversing the dangers of heart disease are fairly straightforward – lifestyle modification begins with diet and exercise – lack of awareness within the medical community poses a threat to stemming the tide of heart-related problems.

Mathur's hope is that within the center's first five years, 5,000 people will have been screened and educated. He said the center is on track to reaching its goal; the center has facilitated more than 2,000 screenings in the last two and a half years.

South Asians over the age of 18 run the risk of health complications due to poor cardiac health, according to Mathur. He suggests all South Asians get screened, in addition to a full chemical work-up. Mather says every person of South Asian heritage could benefit from taking preventative measures concerning heart health, regardless of any overt physical signs, which are often absent.

"My intent is to make sure we spread the word as early as possible ... not only in the Bay area ... this applies to South Asians everywhere," he said. "It is my hope South Asians sit up and take notice."