

I Know My Blood Pressure Numbers

By Renae Akau

Growing up, I was always reminded of what poor health can do.

At the young age of 34, my father passed away from a massive heart attack. I was just 10 months old and have no recollection of who he was. Years later, heart disease claimed both of my paternal grandparents.

As often is the case, I always thought I was young and invincible. Yet as I grew older, I started to suffer from unexplained cardiac episodes. I was told by doctors to pay attention to my body, for I was predisposed to the same fate that claimed my father and his parents.

In August of 2019 at the age of 38 my doctor and I decided it was time to try something different. For years I struggled with unhealthy habits. Based on my family history, I needed to take control of my health or risk succumbing to the consequences of my choices and my genes.

In October of 2019 I started the Hui Pono Ornish Program at the Hilo Medical Center. For nine weeks I worked with a group of highly trained health care professionals on changing my life habits. In a matter of days, I saw a noticeable difference in the way I felt physically and mentally.

The program consisted of four elements: Nutrition, fitness, group support and stress management. Since the program is designed to reverse cardiovascular disease, great emphasis was put on managing blood pressure, as it is often a leading indicator of health issues.

Throughout the program, I was monitored constantly and taught that awareness of one's own health is the start to changing unhealthy habits. Eating the right foods, exercising regularly, surrounding myself with love and support, and managing stress helped me to reduce my blood pressure and maintain healthy levels even post program.

As an Ornish alumni, I continue the lifestyle religiously and remain in close contact with my Ornish 'ohana. We regularly meet, exercise, share meals and, most importantly, "talk story."

My friends and family have noticed a significant difference in me and have even adopted some of my Ornish habits to better their own health. My mother and sister have both taken up routine exercise and are being more conscientious about their nutrition and managing stress levels.

Though I am never one for attention, I am honored to inspire others through my story and my journey. Now at age 39 I see life differently. I feel better than ever, and all I needed to do was take the time to pay attention to my body and care about my health.

Community First will begin its first annual "KNOW YOUR NUMBERS, OWN YOUR HEALTH" campaign in February that aims to end high blood pressure on Hawaii Island. Knowing your numbers refers to everyone knowing their blood pressure numbers. The goal is to be as familiar with it as you are with your own height and weight.

Did you know that both high blood pressure and hypertension puts you at risk for heart disease and stroke which are the leading causes of death in the United States and affects about one-third of our adult population? It is referred to as the silent killer, as most people do not experience any symptoms or signs, and half of those with high blood pressure are not aware of it. Don't be careless about your health, take ownership of it.

Healthy blood pressure is one key to a healthy lifestyle and monitoring your numbers will arm you with powerful knowledge to help you take control of your health and your life.

I have outlived my father by five years so far, and I am hopeful I will be here for years to come. I encourage everyone to own your health, know your numbers, and change your life for the better.

Visit www.ownyourhealthhi.org for more information.

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This column was prepared by Community First, a nonprofit established to help the community respond to the health-care cost crisis and support initiatives that change health care from just treating disease to caring for health.