

Heart attack victim sows seeds of support group

By DANIEL FEINGOLD
Jewish Press

After his first heart attack at age 42, Harvey Malter felt like there was no one he could really relate to, or to share experiences and concerns. There were support groups for just about every other disease, but he couldn't find one for heart attack victims and their families.

Now at age 65, Malter, a resident of Tampa, is dedicating his retirement toward making a difference in the community by



Harvey Malter

doing something about that. Malter was the catalyst to beginning the only Mended Hearts support group in Tampa.

"I had been thinking about it as I was approaching retirement, what I was going to do to keep busy," said Malter, who was a controller for F&M Bay/Seer Electronics Recycling. "Then it just dawned on me that why don't I try doing volunteer work with heart patients?"

Malter, who resides in Carrollwood with his wife, Karen, visited Pepin Heart Hospital in Tampa, a division of University Community Health, to inquire about starting a cardiac support group. He first spoke with the hospital's volunteering coordinator about

helping heart disease patients, but was not satisfied with her idea to have him sit with the patients' families while the patients were in surgery.

During a meeting for new volunteers at Pepin, Malter took the opportunity to speak briefly with the President/CEO of University Community Health, Norm Stein. After sharing his ideas, Stein was on board with starting the support group.

"After speaking with him for about five minutes, he looked at me [and] said 'you are so passionate about this, I cannot say no to you,'" Malter said.

From there, the CEO of Pepin was contacted and approved the idea and got in touch with Mended Hearts, a national nonprofit organization affiliated with the American Heart Association. Despite their nationwide status, Mended Hearts did not have a Tampa Chapter, although there is a Clearwater/Largo chapter.

Malter was motivated to start the cardiac patient support group by his own experiences and his family history. His father died from his first and only heart attack at the age of 51, and Malter's younger brother, Barry Malter of Maryland, has suffered from one as well.

The two of us are both astounded that we've made it into our mid-60s," admitted Malter. "When you have a heart attack at 40 or 42, you figure you only got a couple years to go."

Malter himself experienced two heart attacks in two years, the last which required a quintuple bypass. He was treated both times at Pepin, which is why he chose to start the community support group there.

Because he felt unable to truly relate to anybody after his heart attacks, Malter thought there needed to be a place for him and other heart patients to be able to share their stories and concerns. Following his own two heart attacks, talking to doctors helped, but he felt like only someone who had experienced a heart attack, or who had a family member who had, could truly relate.

With roughly 30 heart patients and family members in attendance per meeting, Malter said that it is comforting for everybody when related experiences with health are

shared, such as his own problem coming up with a suitable exercise regimen.

Since his weight and arthritis problems added on to his pre-existing heart condition, Malter was told by his orthopedic surgeon that the only exercise he could do was swimming. Since then, Malter routinely swims at the gym on his path to a healthier lifestyle.

The Tampa Mended Hearts group meets on the third Thursday of every month from 6:30 to 8 p.m. on the first floor of Pepin Heart Hospital in Tampa. It is open to all.

As the individual who oversees the group from a perspective outside of the medical profession, Malter now serves as the community liaison for the support group, but does not run the actual meetings. Nurse Practitioner Kathy Crowell leads the group sessions.

The group discusses certain topics each meeting, ranging from diet and exercise to prevention of further heart problems. Each meeting has an individual topic, the most recent one dealing with heart medications. Following the opening discussion, a guest speaker has the floor for 30 minutes.

The latter half of the meeting, patients and families break up into different groups. Individuals from each group relay their stories and convey their thoughts and concerns. Malter said that, when starting the support group, he felt it was imperative to have family members included. There is then a question and answer period to conclude the meeting.

Current members of Congregation Kol Ami in Tampa, Malter and his wife plan on moving to Atlanta in a few years to be closer to their daughter and grandsons. Although he knows it will take some time and publicity, Malter said he would like to leave this chapter of Mended Hearts with about 100 people in

attendance for each monthly meeting. As for a cardiac support group in Atlanta, Malter already has his plans prepared.

"I've got to research to see if there's one in Atlanta, and if there isn't one in Atlanta, I'm [going to] start one," said Malter.

It doesn't necessarily have to be a Mended Hearts group. Cardiac patients can check with their cardiologists or other hospitals, and if they can't find what they want, work to start one, like Malter did.

For more information or to register for the Tampa Mended Hearts monthly meetings, call University Community Health at 1-877-482-4362.

Mended Hearts also has a chapter in the Clearwater/Largo area. Excluding July and August, the group meets the third Monday of the month at 7 p.m. at the Cheek-Powell Heart and Vascular Pavilion at Morton Plant Hospital. For more information on the Clearwater/Largo Chapter, call (727) 443-6721.



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June 10 Adjustable Gastric Band
12pm
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June 16 Adjustable Gastric Band
5:30pm
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7:15pm
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