

Listening to the angel on her shoulder

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are an important part of the Carolina Heart Alliance Networking for Equity (CHANGE) project. CHWs recruit participants, meet with them in their homes and guide them through modules to improve their diet, physical activity and quit smoking. They are the most important link between the research project and the community, but they also make individual relationships that can change lives.

Cheryl Amey calls her CHANGE CHW an angel.

“She was my motivator and my good angel,” Amey said of Ms. Eley, her CHW. “There’s a good angel and a bad angel on my shoulder, and she was my voice of reason. When I wanted to give up, she would say no, that’s not an option.”

Amey was ready for a big change when she realized her weight and eating habits were threatening her life. At age 49, she was overweight and had uncontrolled diabetes.

“A lightbulb went off, that well, you haven’t seen your first grandchild yet and you’re going to miss everything,” she said.

Amey attends a breast cancer awareness fair near her home in Murfreesboro every year, and met the CHANGE team at the fair. She told them about her health issues, and they said she should try the CHANGE program.

Amey said she enjoyed utilizing the CHANGE modules, which focus on different parts of the program. The exercise module gives examples of short exercises for both cardiovascular and strengthening activities that are easy to do at home.

“I don’t have to walk for an hour like I thought previously, or walk five or seven days a week. I could just walk three days a week and do weightlifting. I had an 8lb hand weight sitting in my house that I’ve never picked up, and Ms. Eley said to pick it up.”

Amey also made big changes to her eating habits by following the CHANGE guidelines. She learned to increase her vegetable intake, utilize smaller portions and read labels for fat and sugar content. She said her CHW helped her make small changes that led to bigger ones.

“Even at my age I was willing to learn, and she’s the one who taught me,” said Amey.

Amey said she is most proud of her weight loss through the program, but that sticking to the dietary guidelines consistently was also her biggest challenge. She started using a smaller plate and watching her portions for every meal, and her work is paying off.

“The numbers don’t lie,” she said. “The numbers show that I’m doing something. That’s encouraging me to keep doing what I’m doing.”

But, she said the key to her success was having a CHW who encouraged and believed in her throughout the program. She still hears Ms. Eley’s voice in her head when she’s tempted to have a soda or eat something unhealthy telling her to put it down and just keep heading to her goal.

“Get a mentor,” Amey advised to others looking to improve their health. “Get someone that is going to encourage you and say they’re happy with what you’re doing. It makes a difference. Get someone on your side.”

