

## Healthy Heart Program Gives Georgian Journalist a New Lease on Life

**A**s a journalist, writer, and former editor-in-chief of a regional newspaper, 69-year-old Alexander Didebashvili had always led a hectic—some would even say stressful—life. Juggling work and family was never a problem, though, because he loved both his writing and his wife Nona and their two children. “It wasn’t until I turned 60 that I noticed some heart palpitations along with some other symptoms such as dizziness or shortness of breath,” Alexander says. “Sometimes, my heart would beat so fast I was afraid it would explode out of my chest.”

Around that time, Alexander also remembers that he often felt exhausted—even by some of the activities he used to do without breaking a sweat. “I was worried by these changes, but they never lasted very long, so I attributed them to the fact that I was getting older and slowing down a bit,” he explains. Alexander admits that he put off visiting the doctor for several years after he first noticed the telltale signs of hypertension, which is called the “silent killer” because symptoms—if they occur at all—are so easy to ignore.

“Finally, I grew tired of never feeling quite well and decided to visit my physician. The facility had been remodeled in cooperation with a group of Americans from Milwaukee and was now called the Mtskheta Family Medicine Center. The doctor told me that they had initiated many new services and programs thanks to the training they received through this partnership,” Alexander recounts. “She did some tests and told me that I had high blood pressure. She said that this condition could lead to heart attack, stroke, or even death if I didn’t get it under control immediately.”

Then his doctor told him about the Center’s new “Healthy Heart” program, which could provide him with the care and information he would need to change his lifestyle habits, reduce stress, and get his blood pressure under control. “I agreed to participate and met with Nino Revazishvili, the nurse who runs the program,” Alexander says, noting, “She took my blood pressure again then talked to me at length about the steps I needed to take in order to



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Now that his blood pressure is under control, Alexander can return his attention to his latest project—an anthology of children’s poems and fables.

effectively manage my hypertension. We talked about diet, exercise, and other lifestyle changes that could make a real difference for me and she told me that we would work together to ensure my success.”

Some of the changes—adding some daily exercise and cutting down on saturated fat, for example—fit easily into his lifestyle. “I made a pact with myself to do some sort of physical activity every morning. I even got my wife to join in, which makes things more enjoyable,” Alexander says with a smile. “My wife is also helping me eat more healthfully. We both thought that animal fat was not good for us, but before I started the ‘Healthy Heart’ program we didn’t understand its role in causing high cholesterol and hypertension. Now, she cooks with vegetable oil and we try to eat only lean meat. In addition, I’ve cut down on the amount I drink, which is not necessarily the easiest thing to do in Georgia given our culture and traditions,” he continues, his smile deepening.

Once thought to be a problem affecting wealthy industrialized nations, cardiovascular disease has proven that it recognizes no socioeconomic or geographical borders. The stresses of some 13 years of political and economic transition coupled with unhealthy lifestyle choices has resulted in a virtual epidemic of largely preventable ailments such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension in Georgia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. This is the story of one man who, after discovering he was at risk for heart attack or stroke because of his high blood pressure, found the support he needed to manage his condition at the Mtskheta Family Medicine Center, which was established by AIHA’s Mtskheta-Mtianeti/Milwaukee partnership. The story of the nurse who helped him is on the other side.

Even so, the heart-healthy habits Alexander has learned from Nino have taken root in his whole family and are spreading to some of his friends, too. “Of course my wife adopted many of my lifestyle changes because she wants to be sure I succeed and stay healthy, but others also noticed the difference in my outlook and energy level and began asking me questions about what I was doing—first my children, then some of my friends and colleagues,” he professes. “I feel so much better and my mind seems much clearer as well. I feel that I have more motivation and creativity, so I’ve gotten back to writing children’s books. I’ve had six of them published in the past, but seemed to lose interest when I wasn’t taking care of myself.”

According to Alexander, effectively managing his blood pressure and recovering his interest in writing are two major benefits of his participation in the Center’s “Healthy Heart” program, “But, seeing my family and close friends reap the rewards of better health thanks to my experience might be the greatest benefit of all.”

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