
South Central Conference

Disabilities Ministry Newsletter

Special Edition

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My Journey With Diabetes Continues .

by Lois Williams

As I've continued my journey living with diabetes, I've realized there are many curves in the road; and that my road is ever winding uphill. In August of 1998, I organized *The Caring Link Diabetes Support Group*. The significance of "The Caring Link" as illustrated by my logo of 3 hearts connected together, is that the support group bridges the gap between the individual with diabetes and his/her health team. All 3 must work together in order for the individual to experience the best life possible while living with the disease. We celebrated our 8th anniversary this August

Although living with diabetes has at times been a devastating experience *and* still presents ongoing challenges, it has been a blessing for me to share my experiences with this disease at numerous local churches and civic organizations. Little did I realize the avenues through which I would be able to minister to others: There have been and continue to be many opportunities for me to participate in health fairs and to give presentations at various events. It has literally become my mission in life to do what I can to help others avoid the complications that may develop as a result of uncontrolled blood glucose levels. If I can spare others from having to go through what I've gone through, and even more importantly, if I can help people *prevent* the onset of type 2 diabetes altogether, I will have accomplished my mission.

In June of 2000, while dealing with the devastation of major vision loss, I simultaneously had to endure the negative comments about blindness on my job. My supervisor and co-workers were relentless with their putdowns. I heard comments such as, "I would rather be deaf than blind." "You can't see well enough to do that." "Your blindness could endanger the clients." It became unbearable to work in such an environment. I tried, to no avail, to get help from several organizations to see if these comments went against the Americans With Disabilities Act. I really did not want to leave my job because I loved working with the clients, but the stress was causing my blood pressure and blood sugar levels to increase. I was forced to resign.

Now I was left to wonder what I would do without an income and

without health insurance. Up to that point, I had used my personal income to purchase diabetes educational and promotional materials, including videos, from the National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse for the support group, and also for my presentations in the community. But God is good! He provided another way for me to obtain materials. I met Sylvia Oakes at a diabetes health fair. Sylvia is the Urban Extension Agent for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System in Madison County. They have a wide variety of information on diabetes, and she allowed me to get whatever I could use. I soon became a volunteer for the Extension System.

When Sylvia began conducting diabetes-cooking classes, she asked me to assist her by preparing meat substitutes, since I'm a vegetarian. When she conducted workshops on healthy eating for seniors, I did presentations about diabetes. And when the Extension System sponsored health fairs, Sylvia made sure that I had space for a diabetes booth. Since 2001, The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) has conducted an annual Diabetes Conference in Montgomery, under the profound leadership of Evelyn Crayton, Ed.D, RD, LD., who is the Assistant Director of Family and Community Programs at Auburn University. It has been my pleasure to participate in many of these conferences. It was at the 2002 conference that I met Habiba Shaw, Ph.D., who is a health education specialist for the Extension System at Tuskegee University.

It was at an ACES conference I met Sandra Langston, Director for the Alabama Department of Public Health Diabetes Division and her assistant Debra Griffin, RN, both of whom provided me with diabetes literature. When Sandra put together a Diabetes Task Force she asked me to serve on that committee. Every member of the committee was an expert in his or her area of specialty related to diabetes. I met and worked with Mary McIntyre MD,

Director of the Alabama Medicaid Program. Joan Wimberly RN, and her staff at the Alabama Quality Assurance Foundation (AQAF) were quite generous in providing me with diabetes literature. They also wrote an article about my vision impairment in their newsletter, "Quality Perspective".

At the ACES diabetes conference in 2004 I heard a presentation by an A1c Champion, who invited anyone interested in making diabetes presentations to contact the Patient Mentor Institute. (An A1c is a blood test that indicates how well a person is controlling their blood glucose, >7 is good control). I called and after some training, I became an A1c Champion. Through this program I have had the privilege of making diabetes presentations in many of the small towns in Alabama as well in cities outside of the state.

In 2005, I was privileged to a presentation at the 2nd Annual Diabetes Today Conference at Tuskegee. Gwendolyn Lipscomb, R.N., who is the Minority Health Coalition Director for the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) had recommended me .

In 2005 Kathy House, RN, and Kathleen O'Donohue, PA-C, invited me to have a diabetes booth at all the Care Assurance System for the Aging and Homebound (CASA) health fairs. Their networking efforts have put me in touch with various other people and organizations who need diabetes information for their programs.

In addition to my position as an A1c Champion, I've progressed in positions with the Diabetes Action Network (DAN) - from board member, to secretary, to 1st Vice President, and now President. As President of DAN, I was asked if I would be interested in serving on a diabetes advocacy committee addressing the top 3 diabetes-related complications, which are blindness, amputations and kidney failure. Of course, I said, "Yes!"

When I started my support group back in 1998, the plan was to learn more about diabetes for myself and share it with a few other people around me. Little did I know how *much* I would learn and just how much there *is* to learn about diabetes. I never dreamed that I would go to so many places and touch so many people. My activities include facilitating The Caring Link Diabetes Support Group monthly meetings, A1C Champion-sponsored presentations, community-sponsored presentations, attending the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's conferences, hosting a booth at CASA's health fairs, hosting a booth at the annual "Juneteenth" Health Fair and Celebration (this is the date that the slaves in Alabama learned of the Emancipation Proclamation), the annual 100 Black Men's Health Fair, and the Successful Aging Program. In addition, I attend the annual DAN board meetings as well as the diabetes seminars held during the conventions.

I was asked several years ago by Mike Jones, President of the Alabama affiliate of the National Federation for the Blind (NFB),

how I would describe my success in keeping my diabetes in control, it took some thought, but I came up with the acronym "DIME." It simply stands for Diet, Information, Monitoring, and Exercise. These are the 4 most important ways I stay in control. Being in control is having an A1c test of less than 7. Mike had posed his question to me after asking me to lead the Diabetes Action Network program in Alabama. DAN is a division of the National Federation of the Blind.

I firmly believe that it is through Divine intervention that I have been able to change my lifestyle, and have been permitted by God's grace to do what I've done. And I will continue, through *His grace*, to champion the cause of diabetes awareness

I have come a *long* way from the time when I was forced to resign my job in 2000, simply because others are limited in their views about individuals with disabilities. It has been proven over and over and over again that I, as well as most others with disabilities, have much to contribute to society. It has often been the case that a so-called "disability" is the *springboard* for greater accomplishments than may have otherwise been achieved.

This is a special edition of the SCC Newsletter normally published quarterly. If you have news relating to Disabilities Ministry, please call us at 256.503.9521 or via email at George.Hamilton@scs-adventist.org

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