From Alaska Wilderness Springs a Philanthropic Physician

UA Sarver Heart Center
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Dr. Lori Mackstaller developed her interest in helping others from her parents, who raised her and her two sisters in a one-room cabin in Soldotna, Alaska.

"While there were no philanthropic organizations there, my parents and others in the community always offered time and resources to others who needed help. People in the community took care of each other," says Mackstaller, who is clinical associate professor in the Division of Cardiology, Department of Medicine, at the University of Arizona College of Medicine â€“ Tucson [1] and is the Edwin J. Brach Foundation/Hazel and Bertram Brodie Endowed Lecturer for Heart Disease in Women at the UA Sarver Heart Center [2].

This past Spring, Mackstaller received the Community Impact Award from the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Tucson Alumnae Chapter, for her professional commitment to educating women about heart disease. But the award could have been as much about her personal commitment to Tucson and her own healthy lifestyle.

Mackstaller's family moved to Soldotna from Toledo, Ohio, when she was 18 months old and her sisters were under age 5. Her father, who had been a prisoner of war in Romania during World War II, decided it was time to leave his family's privileged status in Toledo for a homestead in Alaska's wilderness. They lived in a tent for six months while Mackstaller's father built a one-room cabin. She remembers playing in the dirt with the fine china and silver â€“ the only dishes her mom brought from Toledo.

"We didn't have any medicine or health care. We relied on public health nurses who came through to make sure the children had shots and we'd row a dory out to what my parents called the good ship Hope, a vessel that came by every so often to screen people for tuberculosis, which was rampant in the Eskimo and Alaskan Indian populations," Mackstaller recalls.

She attended school from first grade through high school in the same building, about 10 miles from their cabin. "We just moved from one room to the next each year that we were promoted. The teachers were very committed and I got a great education there," she says. While parents today may wait at the bus stop to make sure their children aren't abducted by a stranger, Mackstaller's father made sure no moose were nearby when the children needed to board the bus. "Once our bus was attacked by an angry moose," she said.

"It actually was a great life â€“ although, I always told my mom that I was going to leave and never come back, and that's about what happened," she adds.

Her father grew potatoes until she was 16, about the time she left Soldotna for nursing school at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix. "Then he decided to do something fun â€“ opening
bars! I served as a waitress when I returned each summer during nursing school," Mackstaller said.

After completing nursing school in 1967, Mackstaller began work as a pediatric nurse in Phoenix, then returned to Soldotna for a year to work as an obstetrics nurse, and then left to practice nursing in California, following her first husband. After a divorce, she moved to Tucson in 1974 with her two young children and became a charge nurse in the critical care unit at what was then called University Medical Center.

She later remarried and, while working on blending her family with her husbandâ€™s, she developed a desire to become more involved in the community. A friend recommended the American Heart Association, since she worked in health care. She jumped right in as chair of the annual Heart Ball. She also became involved with Angel Charity for Children, the arts and other organizations that benefit children.

During the 1990s she decided to pursue medical school and, 30 years after she became an RN, added an MD to those initials. She has been part of the UA College of Medicine faculty since 2000.

"Iâ€™m passionate about working with medical students. I like to give students opportunities to interact with patients, to show students how to empower patients and honor their wishes. Itâ€™s important that doctors help patients make rational decisions," Mackstaller said.

Part of Mackstallerâ€™s practice as a physician is to serve as a role model. She eats very few simple carbohydrates, drinks in moderation and exercises just about every day â€“ taking spinning classes on weekends and walking 2 miles on a treadmill three to four days a week.

"During the past three years, Dr. Mackstaller has worked tirelessly to educate women and minorities on heart disease and how to prevent it," says Wanda F. Moore, Arizona state coordinator for the Delta Sigma Thetaâ€™s Farwest Region, chair of the Tucson Alumnae Chapterâ€™s Physical and Mental Health Committee and chair of the Sarver Heart Centerâ€™s Community Coalition for Heart Health Education for Women of Color.

"Her leadership and commitment to heart health education takes her to the pulpits of churches, school classrooms, minority women's conferences, neighborhood centers and community meetings throughout Southern Arizona. Her work to reduce heart disease in women of color and help women lead healthy lives makes her an exemplary recipient of the first Community Impact Award," Moore said.

Mackstaller also has been a recipient of numerous other community honors for her service and philanthropy, including the American Heart Association Old Pueblo Divisionâ€™s Volunteer of the Year Award, the Association of Fundraising Professionalâ€™s Spirit of Philanthropy recognition and the YWCAâ€™s Women On The Move Award, plus inclusion on the Inside Tucson Business Women of Influence list.

Mackstaller says she never asked for any of the awards.

"My core belief is that if you live in a community, you have to give back in some way, whether with time, service or money."

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