

An Interview with Joel Kahn, M.D.

by Mark Huberman



Dr. Joel Kahn is founder of the Kahn Center for Cardiac Longevity and a Professor of Medicine at Wayne State University School of Medicine. He is a Summa cum Laude graduate of the University of Michigan School of Medicine and author of over 150 scientific articles, 5 books, and hundreds of health articles online. He has a national public TV show, The Whole Health Solution. He opened GreenSpace Cafe in Ferndale Michigan in 2015 with his son Daniel and wife Karen, and recently added a food truck. He won the awards as "Sexiest Vegan over 50" from PETA for the year 2016-2017 and "Crains Business Detroit Health Hero" 2016. He is very active on Facebook and Twitter and has launched a podcast on iTunes as Heart Doc VIP. His website is kahnlongevitycenter.com. He is a proud member of the NHA.



I don't recall reading in your book, *The Whole Heart Solution*, how you became a plant-based physician. Did you have a health crisis that caused you to re-examine your education and training as a medical doctor?

Fortunately, mine is a story of health and not distress. My inspiration came from reading John Robbins' book *Diet for New America* during my undergraduate years. It was like a WOW moment! I was just out of medical school and I didn't quite understand that there was an ethical component to plant-based eating as well. Shortly after starting my first cardiology job in July 1990, Dr. Dean Ornish published his first study, which appeared, as I recall, in the medical journal, *The Lancet*. That was another WOW moment! This was good science and revolutionary science. I started giving his hardback book to patients and told them to buy it when it came out in paperback.

So neither you nor your wife had a health problem?

Nope, and now that we're both in our late fifties, we're maintaining exceptionally good health. I credit a lot of it to nutrition and fitness. In my view, "nutrition is the king and fitness is the queen." That's Jack LaLanne turned on his head with a couple other things that I do like yoga and meditation. For me and my wife, getting on the right path with nutrition early in life was a real blessing.

As you know, there is a lot of confusion and misinformation in the plant-based world about the best diet, and one area that is more controversial than most is the Paleo diet.

What's your take on it? Do we really need to go back to our cavemen roots to find out how to eat?

Instead of attacking the adherents to the Paleo diet, I wish we could, instead, unify around the real enemy, which is 55 years of fast-food, processed foods, gas station food, vending food, and, unfortunately, often hospital food. All of these foods are dangerously high in salt, oil,

sugar, and they are also high in chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, and everything else that's driven poor health throughout the western world. And, unfortunately, we are exporting this way of eating to isolated places like Okinawa, Japan, where they used to have exceptional health and longevity. Avoiding all of those things

"Getting on the right path with nutrition early in life was a real blessing."



Dr. Joel Kahn with Mark Huberman at the NHA Conference.

should be the starting point.

Let's all hold hands: the Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, everybody. But it's ugly out there. It is possible, but not proven, that daily strict adherence to a low-carb/high-fat diet may help with weight loss, diabetic control, even reversal of Type 2 diabetes, but a halfhearted attempt at a Paleo diet or low-carb/high-fat diet probably is of very little benefit. There is still going to be some benefits if you eat tons of fruit and veggies. However, there is just no balance in terms of the amount of medical science that supports a vegan, SOS-free diet for prevention and reversal of disease worldwide vs. the few short-term studies that offer some support for adhering to the Paleo diet.

I'm skeptical of the Paleo movement because there are under 50 short-term studies (six weeks to six months) that talk about weight loss, cholesterol, inflammatory markers, and diabetes. You don't really know the long-term outcome, and it may be harmful. Of course, my primary interest is cardiology, and I have seen no data ever of a single case of atherosclerosis being altered or reversed with the Paleo diet. At the end of the day, I would rather somebody eat a Paleo diet, even though it's cruel to animals and it's cruel to the environment, than eat the standard American processed food diet. The best view is that it should be considered a stepping-stone to reducing or eliminating animal products from your diet.

In reading the approach to heart health outlined in your book, it reminded me of Hillary Clinton's concept that "it takes a village" in that in order to be heart healthy, you have to treat the rest of your body healthfully. Am I right about that?

You are absolutely right. Fortunately, in today's world, medicine is beginning to be looked at more holistically and it is described in various terms, such as integrated medicine, functional medicine and holistic medicine. Your diet may well be the reason that your GI tract is inflamed and leaky or that you're having migraines, rashes and runny noses. The same may well be the cause of your losing weight and experiencing high blood pressure. When you're trying to keep the person together as a whole, usually the solution is



Dr. Kahn and his wife Karen

"Some studies estimate that as high as 93% of cardiovascular disease is related to lifestyle while only 7% is genetic."

to improve your diet and you'll find that a lot of things get better at the same time.

People often say, "I've got heart problems because it's in my family, it's in my genes." Are we really prisoners of our heredity?

There's a bit of a joke that "the reason diabetes runs in the family is that nobody runs in the family." It is not necessarily the genes, but the sedentary life that can carry over from generation to generation. The best way I can put it is that "genes load the gun but lifestyle pulls the trigger." Some studies estimate that as high as 93% of cardiovascular disease is related to lifestyle while only 7% is genetic. Some other studies say it's 15% genetic. But even if you're in that high-risk group, the only logical approach is to adopt a healthy lifestyle centered on extremely good nutrition that will allow you to add on all the other layers of wellness.

Dr. Ornish demonstrated the powerful effect on our genes of adopting a healthy lifestyle. He took a small group of men with low-grade prostate cancer, and after three months, the genes that promote cancer growth were no longer active. The same has been shown for cardiovascular genes. The field is called "nutrigenomics."

You're a cardiologist, but you write in your book that people with heart problems should "bypass bypass surgery." Do you really recommend that?

At least the majority of patients being referred for bypass surgery should be offered nutritional therapy first because, frankly, cardiologists don't even agree on standards for the surgery. If you took a hundred people today having bypass and you applied the strictest criteria out of our literature, maybe 10-20% really meet those criteria. For the other 80% it's emotional. Sadly, there are only two options in modern cardiology as I practiced it for a quarter of a century: stents or bypass. Since stents are considered risky, you only have the second option, which is bypass. There is, of course, a third option, which is intensive lifestyle changes, as demonstrated by Dr. Ornish, Dr. Esselstyn, and now Dr. Fuhrman. So now there are three doors but nobody ever brings up the third door.

Why do you think your fellow cardiologists don't see this?

I really believe they don't know. I think the majority of them have never heard of Ornish, Esselstyn or Fuhrman, and there are thousands of doctors practicing conventionally. I truly don't believe that stents and bypasses are long-term solutions, and there's really no champion around offering patients lifestyle options. It's easier for my colleagues to just say, "Have the bypass and afterwards we can talk about your diet." But the diet conversation rarely happens.

Is there a place for stents and bypass surgeries for people who are unwilling to make the lifestyle changes that you recommend?

There is absolutely a role. If you're in the emergency room and in distress, a stent can be life-saving. And if you have a certain type of blockage pattern and instability, bypass can be life-saving. But I think that this is the situation in only 15-20% of cases. And unfortunately, of those hundred undergoing a bypass, three are going to have a stroke or be disabled. The surgeries can also be fatal or result in infections. I just had a financial adviser in my restaurant the other day who at 55 days after his bypass, got a sternal infection. Twelve weeks later it started to heal but it was very painful and he was on IV antibiotics.

Dr. Esselstyn often points out that when people complain about how "extreme" it is to adopt a plant-based lifestyle, the real "extreme" is having your chest opened up by a cardiac surgeon. Do you agree with him?

I do. But the reality is that most people have never heard of the "third door" of intensive lifestyle changes I referred to earlier, and it is certainly not something that their cardiologist is saying. So they don't even know to ask about it.

Do you think that awareness is rising about the "third door" or do you think a small subset of people are still willing



Dr. Kahn is an advocate for sharing the truth about diet and lifestyle.

to take the plunge?

I think the only thing that's moved it is the Internet. People can Google heart surgery options or natural treatments to heart disease and they're going to find it easier than they ever could 10 or 15 years ago. Unfortunately, it's still not being taught in medical schools and I think we're still at least a

generation away from it really.

I understand that you teach at medical school, but do you also have a private practice?

I have a very vibrant practice and have been seeing patients since 1990. I have changed the model over the years, fortunately successfully, without going belly up. I did take an academic job as a professor at Wayne State University, the largest medical school in America. But I kept patient care at the core. I'm in a rather unique preventive cardiology practice that consists of me and one employee, my nurse Jennifer. It's pure joy but I'm very busy. People from all over the country come to see me and often mention that they have read the works of Dr. Esselstyn and others, but they need a cardiologist in practice to guide them and

hold their hands.

What are your office practice hours?

Monday through Thursday, 9 to 5PM, but some evenings may go until 9PM. There's quite a big demand.

When do you teach at Wayne State?

The cardiology rotation, which occurs about six or eight weeks a year.

How does the medical staff view the "radical" teachings of Dr. Joel Kahn?

They're starting to be more respectful. Many of my professional partners knew that I was eating healthier than most of them 20 to 25 years ago. I was the guy having the Boca Burger while my colleagues were having the beef burger. But after watching me remain healthy all these years, a lot of them have adopted healthier habits. You

know when you get to your mid-fifties, you'd better start adopting some health habits or things are going to start falling off left and right. The medical school now allows me an hour to kind of go after real preventive cardiology, or even have a debate, in a friendly way, with another professor. Over the last two years it has been a lively debate but it's carefully monitored. Of course, it's really all about passing the boards, and questions about nutrition and prevention are not going to be on the boards.



Dr. Kahn performing a backbend while eating some kale.

During your career as a cardiologist did you perform surgeries?

Yes, I have placed over 10,000 stents, many in the emergency setting, training with the real pioneers in the field. I also worked in the cath lab until about a year and a half ago. So I know the good and the bad. Fortunately, over my entire career, I don't recall anyone ever dying at my hands.

Have we, as a society, become conditioned to accept diseases as being normal, or at least acceptable, because we have medications to control them, like insulin for diabetes, inhalers for asthma, and statins for heart disease? Is that a mentality that you think has captured America?

Yes, I think it's a mentality but I also think it's the medical model. However, a free-thinking or curious patient can break out of that mentality by getting on the Internet and starting to read. They can begin asking questions, for example, "Do I have to take Claritin for my stuffy nose during the fall?" or "Can I go dairy-free, gluten-free for a few weeks and add some more garlic, onions, and apples to my diet that have some anti-inflammatory agents?" I think the Internet is a blessing because you can find anything; but it can also be a curse due to all of the misinformation. And when we get to nutrition, of course it becomes very difficult for people to sort out. "Why does this expert say increase the amount of meat you eat and that expert says meat causes cancer and heart disease?" the latter of which is supported by real data. You'll find anything on the Internet, but it's very unlikely that you'll find out your local doctor has some natural training that balances the

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traditional training. But it is important to seek that out.

So does Joel Kahn only see people who have a heart problem? If someone wants to see you about Crohn's disease or irritable bowel will you see them?

Yes. The main reason patients come to see me is that they have heart disease and they want real answers, but very often I see people who just want a check-up. I love this type of visit because heart disease occurs so frequently that it's never a wasted visit. But if they happen to have arthritis or rashes or migraines I'm going to cross the line and offer some natural choices as well.

In the Natural Hygiene Movement, from which I and many members of the NHA have come, the global view is that heart disease, diabetes, and even cancer all have their roots in the same foundation and they all have the same remedy: fundamental lifestyle changes in all areas, not just diet. In the same way, is your "Whole Heart Solution" a "whole health solution"?

Yes it is. If you can combine good nutrition, some fitness, good sleep, fresh air, and joy from stress management, you have a great shot at conquering almost everything.

That's one of the things that I'm most impressed by in reading your book. Like the early Hygienic physicians, you seem to be on the same page, that the core pillars of health are diet, regular exercise, clean air, adequate rest, sunshine, and emotional poise. However, that seems to stand in contrast with many of your plant-based peers who seem to say that it's all about the food.

I call it "vegan plus," and although I haven't registered that as a term, I think you can take this as an exceptional nutritional pathway but with lots of things to add in. I like to say you can't out-exercise a bad diet but you can take a great diet and boost it to an even higher level.

So there is more to health than eating mounds of kale?

Sure. You can eat tons of kale, but if you're not managing stress well and not sleeping well you may not be able to achieve the health and well-being that you are aiming

for. There are also things that you can add on to exercise, rest and the like even if you are doing well. Fasting is one of those areas. I know you and your members have followed the science and the practice of fasting for decades. That's nothing I was ever taught about other than in relation to religious observances. I am now seeing an explosion of interest in the science of fasting and the recognition that it can be therapeutic, rejuvenating and regenerative. I really think it's the hottest medical story of 2017, which I've written about in some recent articles. There's also a lot of emerging discussion about the therapeutic potential of yoga and meditation.

One of the things in your book that reminded me of a core principle of Dr. Joel Fuhrman was your recommendation that "your salad should be your main meal" and you talk at length about the value of leafy greens. Why is a large salad so high on your list of priorities?

Because the average American eats only one and a half servings of fruits and vegetables a day, and I'm not actually sure if that includes French fries, ketchup and the like. It's a dismal number. Sadly, statistics show that only 1% of children are eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day. In the United States there is no health habit that we fail at more miserably than eating enough fruits and vegetables. We do a better job at preventing smoking, and avoiding high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes than we do eating well. So you need a skill. All health is a skill that can be taught, and the skill I teach is a huge salad and whatever you want to put on top is your business. If it's a huge salad, you're on your way. The other health skill that I personally like is a gigantic smoothie which is basically a salad in a blender. If you want to make it a little more blueberry-based, it will be fruity. If you want to make it green, that's even better. But those two skills can power your health.



Daniel, Karen, and Joel Kahn with Wanda & Mark Huberman standing in front of the family business, GreenSpace Café.

“The single biggest thing a person can do is reduce their animal product footprint immediately and they’ll make a major difference. Just one person for one day can have an enormous impact on the health of our environment.”

sweeteners, we're going to have to retrain them. Some people have said chew your juice, chew your smoothie, and I think there is some truth to that. So when I make smoothies I don't run the blender very long so they are pretty chewy. But there's a second system in the body that aids absorption that has been known for about a dozen years now. If you just slam down a green smoothie and absorb it, the body actually circulates the dietary nitrates. And they come out of your salivary gland right back into your mouth, and once they're on your tongue, further assimilation occurs. So there's a second chance to actually create this amazing chemical reaction of eating and producing nitric oxide. Of course, it's best to just eat the kale or spinach, but if you don't have the time, you will still benefit if you put them into a smoothie.

In a similar vein, I also recall reading in your book a recommendation that when you eat, try to be one of the slowest eaters in the world.

Yes. I believe in very mindful eating. If you are not mindful and eat quickly, you'll never have a chance to assess how you're feeling and if you're full. I also think there may be better digestion and nutrient absorption by eating slowly. It takes a few minutes as your stomach fills up for that information to get back to the brain to say "slow down." And if you're eating very fast you won't ever get this message.

Within the plant-based health movement, some of your peers caution against smoothies from the standpoint that it will allow the liquid to rush into your system too quickly and without the benefit of digestion and assimilation that begins with chewing.

I look at it from a practical standpoint and I would feel badly talking somebody out of a habit of making a health smoothie in the morning. The more important question I'm going to ask them is what's in it? If it's agave syrup and other such

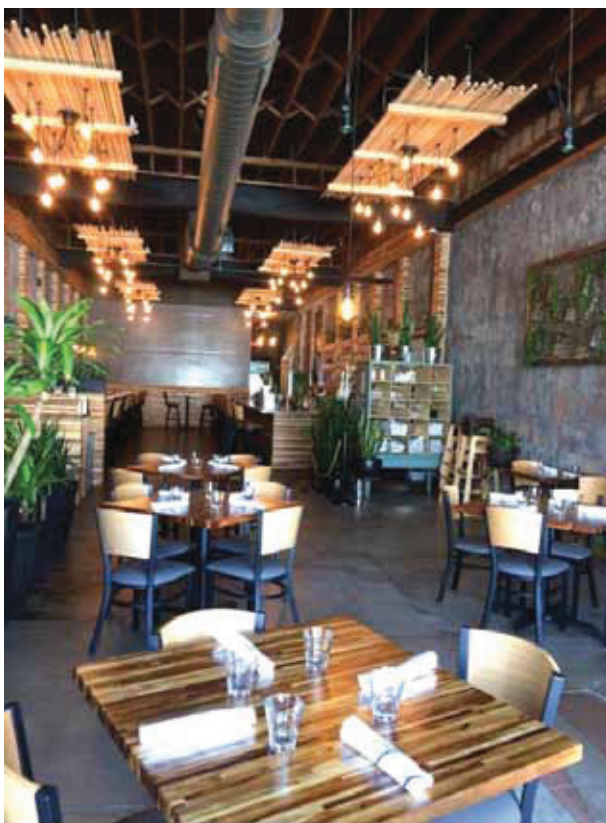
Your philosophy of health reminds me of Norman Cousins, whose emotional health prescription involved laughter and a sunny disposition. Do you think that these two things also play an important role in maintaining good health?

We know for sure that any medical condition will suffer from loneliness, isolation, and lack of social support. They increase the odds you're not going to recover and not going to do as well. You can counter those factors by getting involved in church, synagogue, charity, or gatherings of any kind. You know one of the benefits of following Dr. Esselstyn, Dr. Ornish, Dr. Fuhrman and others is that you become part of a community of like-minded people that can be very comforting, invigorating and probably very healthy. We live in a world where you have to protect yourself from so much negativity. Maybe it always existed but today it seems that we just can't turn off our iPhone and iPads, so much of which has negative content. You don't have to watch every tidbit of the news all day long, because it is a pretty cruel world out there. I protect myself very carefully from how much I expose myself to. I scan the news, and when it's negative, follow it up by maybe listening to some uplifting music or comedy.

You also devote a lot of pages in your book to the environmental toxins we all face and should try to avoid. I recall you writing that we should "study ingredient labels like Jane Goodall studies apes."

There are two aspects of the environmental issue. One is our personal body environment and the importance of allowing the healthy bacteria and systems in our body to detoxify and handle the many toxins to which we are exposed. It's a more difficult world today than it was 50 to 80 years ago. Babies are being born today with all kinds of measurable levels of industrial chemicals in their core blood—more than 200 of which can be measured. If you took samples of urine from the whole family you could measure all kinds of industrial chemicals that are contained in their bodies. It's really at the core of a lot of endocrine disorders and they are significant players in fertility and diabetes, obesity and thyroid disease.

We need to be very careful about the use of plastics and Styrofoam and make the transition to glass bottles and glass containers, even when you're taking lunch to work. The other environmental issue is paying attention to what we eat to stay on this planet. We're close to having 8 billion people on Earth and this number will reach 10 billion in the next few decades; this will have an enormous environmental impact. My biggest gripe when I see medical and nutrition experts debating health is that they rarely bring up animal torture, which is the reality of life for the animals that are slaughtered to provide over 95% of the animal products people are eating in this country. And that



GreenSpace Cafe' serves 100% vegan, non-GMO meals in Ferndale, Michigan.

same animal agriculture gives us dirty water, dirty oceans, dirty land and dirty air. The single biggest thing a person can do is reduce their animal product footprint immediately and they'll make a major difference. Just one person for one day can have an enormous impact on the health of our environment.

Do you think that the promotion of "cage-free chickens" and "grass-fed beef" simply serves that old adage of giving people excuses to support their bad habits?

Yes, to some extent. Although I honor those that are trying to change that system and improve the condition of animals, that is not the answer. There are two routes: either decrease your consumption of all those products or somehow re-do the system so that you don't have these big

giant horrible factories, and I don't see the latter happening any time soon.

Tell me about GreenSpace Cafe, where Wanda and I enjoyed dinner tonight. It seems to be an oasis in the desert in this area. How did it come about?

My oldest son, Daniel, got his MBA and was working in accounting but became bored with it. About four years ago we started looking at a couple of franchises and juice bars in L.A. and Toronto but just didn't find the mix. A vegetarian restaurant in Detroit came on the market and we tried very hard for six months to buy it. I thought the deal was done a hundred times. But the day after we

walked away, a real estate agent called us and said there's this cute little restaurant that was not yet on the market but was available. Long story short, we took over that lease and we took over the lease of the building next door with the idea that we were either going big or we were going home. We started initially with plans for a 250-square-foot juice shop and ended up taking over 4,000 square feet of restaurant space, gutted it, got consultants, and opened about 20 months ago. It's been fantastic! We're well received, very busy, 100% vegan, non-GMO, very often organic, and we have a full liquor license.

It seems like a complete family affair.

My wife is one of the most organized people in the world, very bright and plays an essential role here. My son takes care of the financial, accounting and business side; it's an immense undertaking. There are so many moving parts, between suppliers and employees, and insurance and cash flow, and many issues. I play the social role of greeting and promotion. I have no skill other than bussing tables. It's been a lot of fun, and to add to the enterprise, we bought a food truck two months ago because we want to take this gig on the road throughout southeastern Michigan and bring healthy food to as many different spots as we can during the year. And there's more to come!

I know that one of the hidden secrets in staff retention at Alan Goldhamer's TrueNorth Health Center, is they get to eat for free. Is that true for the GreenSpace Café staff as well?

Yes it is, and I am proud of the fact that many of the staff are part of the vegan movement. Not all were 100% on board, but there's been a lot of shifting in this direction and that is always exciting to see. We don't require it, but when they're eating meal after meal here and meeting all these very different people, it's pretty persuasive.

So is your son, Daniel, whole-food, plant-based?

Yes, he's been for a long time. He's committed.

How about your other children?

We have a 29-year-old son, Jacob, who's a lawyer, just engaged, a little bit more on the Paleo side of life, but he's very smart in nutrition. And I have a 23-year-old daughter,

Jessica, who works in New York in fashion. She's been plant-based for years.

Does Joel Kahn practice what he preaches?

Yes I do. I do a little yoga and cardio every day. Most days I get seven hours of sleep and I practice mindfulness.

I also have an infrared sauna in my bedroom and take appropriate supplementation. I work a lot, but enjoy what I do.

You seem very motivated to do what you do right now.

I consider myself fortunate that I've taken this very unusual turn for a typical cardiologist. You have to have humility and I think I do; this has led to a fantastically interesting life. I mean the people I get to meet—like you—is just one example. I have friends all over the

world that I never would have had if it weren't for this career path I have taken.

It seems to me that your emergence on the scene as one of the leading plant-based doctors has occurred in the last few years. Is that due, in part, to your book?

I think to be noticed you have to write, and my book, *The Whole Heart Solution*, has gained me a lot of attention. I have another book coming out in December called *The*



One of GreenSpace Café's delicious salads



GreenSpace Café's Food Truck takes healthy food to many locations throughout southeastern Michigan.



Dr. Kahn with Ellen Jaffe Jones, his co-author of *Vegan Sex*.

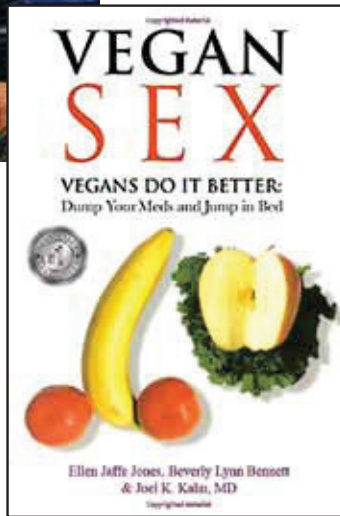
Plant Based Solution that I think will be completely vegan. I am also very active on social media. I blog everywhere, and I've taken on a role, which I don't mind, of being a warrior, and sometimes in a hostile way. I just launched a podcast "Heart Doc VIP" and the V is for Vegan. I'm very active on Twitter and Facebook because I won't tolerate other physicians and nutrition experts spreading nonsense, distortions or falsifications. And I really don't care who they are. The biggest names in the world spread falsehoods and I've taken them on, and down. Dr. Garth Davis is an incredible and wonderful warrior with me. You can stick your neck out but you better be sure that, one, you know what you're talking about and two, you don't mind being attacked because it will happen. There are only a few vegan cardiologists in the country who are speaking publicly and I honor all of them. The number is growing but there's still only a few.

In your many lectures on the plant-based health circuit, do you find the interest growing in this way of eating?

The interest is growing and particularly in the short period since the release of the documentary, *What the Health*, in which I played a part. I think there's a tipping point going on solely because of it. The feedback I'm getting from social media, my patients, and the people in the restaurant is incredible. It's really interesting.

Tell me about your latest book with the colorful title, *Vegan Sex*. What's its message?

For a long time, I've been lecturing and blogging about



two topics related to sex. One is that there is a lot of scientific data that erectile dysfunction can be a clue to heart disease several years before there's a heart attack, so men shouldn't ignore it. The second is that eating healthy provides an advantage when it comes to maintaining healthy sexual performance, as was shown in *Forks over Knives* and Dr. Esselstyn's funny little episode about "raising the flagpole." So I've been talking on that topic. A healthy sex life is a very powerful medical and health tool. We don't think of it that way but the data is very strong that it is.

But is it also just a simple fact that sexual health, like heart health, all has the same foundation?

It does. Sexual health involves arterial health, emotional health, and resilience. You've got to be resilient. In late January, I was in Fort Myers, Florida speaking about SOS-free diets and heart disease. In the parking lot 15 minutes before I was going on, I met a well-known female author and athlete, Ellen Jaffe Jones. Interestingly, we both have been awarded PETA's "sexiest vegan over 50" titles: me in the male department and she in the female department. She said, "I need a doctor to write about sex so I can finish my book. They're insisting that I have a doctor, preferably a cardiologist." I said, "It's done! I'll do it for you." I didn't know what the project was other than it was called *Vegan Sex*. With a handshake we made a deal. We brought in a third author who added 100 recipes, and we pumped the book out. The cover is pretty humorous. Not all people will want to change their lifestyle to be heart attack-free, thin or nondiabetic, but I hope we get a few more in the fold who want to stay sexually healthy or sexually attractive. I just think if you're single and you want to get a mate, sit at the bar with that book. They will come to you quickly!

My last observation of your book is its humorous style. Was that a conscious effort on your part?

Yes, I like to keep it fun, and I have a knack of easily coming up with a play on words. Taking concepts and making them palatable is what I like to do when I speak and blog.

And now that we have a restaurant, in my next book we'll be featuring some of the GreenSpace recipes developed by my wife.

Dr. Kahn, it's been a privilege!

Thank you sir, it's been a privilege for me! 