UM Alumnus Changes Lifestyle Following Scare With Cardiovascular Disease

According to the American Heart Association, someone dies from cardiovascular disease every 40 seconds in this country, making heart disease the nation’s number one killer. For Jesse Marks, that message hit dangerously close to home recently.

"I learned that heart disease could happen to anyone at any time," said Marks, the senior associate athletic director for development at the University of Miami. "But I got the right wakeup call, at the right time, with the right physicians, and the right hospital."

In recognition of American Heart Month in February, Marks, a University of Miami alumnus and longtime employee, is telling his story to raise awareness about heart disease and to encourage others to keep themselves heart healthy.
It is a story Marks himself could not see coming – not as his professional and personal life took off, and certainly not at 34 years old. In the throes of building his career as a development officer for UM’s storied athletic teams, Marks forgot to take care of himself.

“I was living a bad lifestyle,” he recalls. “I was 80-90 pounds overweight, not watching my diet, not exercising and always out and about entertaining and burning the candle at both ends.”

As luck would have it for Marks, The Lennar Foundation Medical Center opened just across the street from his office on the Coral Gables campus in late 2016. Dogged by feelings of fatigue and heartburn, Marks made an appointment for a check-up with Stephen Henry, D.O., a family and sports medicine physician at UHealth Sports Medicine Institute and assistant professor in the UM Miller School of Medicine Departments of Orthopaedics and Family Medicine and Community Health.

Henry sent him for an echocardiogram, which quickly turned up a problem. Marks was suffering from cardiomyopathy, a disease of the heart muscle that makes it harder for the heart to pump blood to the rest of your body.

Physicians determined that his heart was only working at 25 percent, when it should have been at 60 percent, putting him dangerously close to heart failure.

“Can you imagine hearing that you have a heart problem at 34 years old?” Marks said. “I was scared out of my mind.”

Dr. Henry quickly sent Marks to see Mauricio Cohen, M.D.,
director of the Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory at UHealth Tower, part of the University of Miami Health System, who quickly scheduled Marks for cardiac catheterization.

Thankfully, the test showed no blockages in his heart, but Marks remembers Cohen not mincing words about what came next.

“He basically told me I had to diet or die,” remembers Marks.

“We reassured him but then explained that he needed to change his eating habits if he wanted to live a long life, and have children, and see them grow, and see his grandchildren,” added Cohen.

Marks listened and changed his lifestyle. He adhered to a new medication regimen, changed his eating habits, and went to cardiac rehabilitation at UHealth, where he credits UM therapists Sabine Gempel, PT, DPT, and Yessenia Orozco, PT, DPT, and Jessica Fermiza, APRN, with saving his life.

Within one month, Marks had lost 30 pounds, lowered his blood pressure, and watched as his heart function improved to 45 percent.

“He took it very seriously that he was going to defeat heart disease single-handedly,” said Cohen.

He has since lost 100 pounds and says he is in the best shape of his life, running up to 10 miles at a time, sometimes with Cohen beside him on campus.

“He is so fit; he has had to wait a few times for me to catch up to him,” Cohen jokes.
In addition to the improved heart function, Marks says he has no issues now with headaches, sweating and sleep problems. He says he has also learned to go for regular check-ups and to take care of his body through routine preventive care.

“I needed to have this scare,” Marks said. “Because this could have turned out to be something terrible.”

He has nothing but praise for his UM physicians, including Cohen, who he said was a steadying force throughout his ordeal.

“He makes sure to spend the time that you need to get the best possible outcome,” Marks said. “I could not have been in better hands.”

Marks, who earned both his undergraduate and master’s degrees at UM, and also met his wife, Caroline, on campus, is now looking forward to becoming a father for the first time. Caroline is due in June.

“This is the story of an exemplary patient, who had bad luck with cardiac disease, but who took the bull by the horns and was not going to give up,” Cohen said.

To make an appointment with a UM cardiologist, call 305-243-5757 or toll-free at 800-432-0191 Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. EST. You can also make an appointment online.