



At the Heart of Mended Hearts

by Jon Caswell

One of the strengths of MHI is its grassroots nature. We aren't just a Washington-based advocacy group with a board of directors that meets a couple of times a year. MHI has thousands of members in hundreds of chapters having monthly meetings. We are part of every community we serve, and those communities are also part of us. Perhaps that is why so many hospitals and doctors want us to be part of their healthcare delivery: MHI puts a face on the care in healthcare.

Whether old or new, large or small, urban or not, successful chapters are the key to fulfilling our purpose. Here are profiles of a few successful chapters that are spreading the MHI message of hope and health in our unique way.

Chapter 216

South Orange County, California



Chapter 216 has the highest average monthly meeting attendance (64) of any chapter. They've been around 21 years and have 300 members and 40 accredited visitors. Last year they made 132 visits at the Mission Regional Hospital in Mission Viejo, Calif.

One reason they have strong attendance at their chapter meetings is they have speakers on a variety of health topics, not just heart disease. "I think our success stems from outstanding speakers on interesting topics and a good visitor program," said chapter president Fred Damiano. "Once patients are discharged, we offer help through our support group meetings before each chapter meeting. It helps that we have good communication with the doctors and hospital administration." Damiano is a good example of why MHI stays strong: He had only been president a week when we talked, stepping into the role when long-time president Paul Catalano passed away suddenly in December.

Chapter 216 raises money by selling discount entertainment books, T-shirts, and holding a fashion show and golf tournament. They return that money to the community in the form of AEDs, nursing scholarships and equipment for the cardiac center. Their monthly newsletter, *Ticker Talker*, keeps everyone informed.

"We impact our community by offering hope, support, inspiration and information to people affected by heart disease," said Damiano. Surely, that's a purpose satisfying enough to keep caring people involved.



Chapter 358 receiving their charter from Priscilla Soucy

According to Soucy, the credit for that goes to Strout, who also serves as the chapter's visiting coordinator. "I am a patient/family educator at the CMHVI," Strout said. "This program is a valuable extension of my role because these volunteers offer their courage to my patients. They offer a depth of empathy that I feel privileged to be involved with."

CMHVI has been assisting the new chapter with a grant to assist with enrollment, but the chapter's real success is the result of the passion of the people. "This chapter has succeeded as the direct result of the commitment of the volunteers," Strout said. "Their involvement and energy is unsurpassed. They are already visiting angioplasty and heart failure patients."

"This is a special group," RD Soucy said. "I think they will grow."

Chapter 358

Lewiston, Maine



Chartered only this past November by Northeast RD Priscilla Soucy, this chapter has all the enthusiasm of a youngster. Soucy worked with Cheryl Strout, a cardiac rehab and discharge coordinator at Central Maine Medical Center (CMMC), for more than a year to get the chapter up and running. Even as a satellite of Hartford Chapter 9, Lewiston had an active group. Twenty-six of the 30 members are accredited visitors, and last year they made 842 visits at CMMC Heart and Vascular Institute (CMHVI). They visit seven days a week. This spring they will expand their visiting program to St. Mary's Regional Hospital. Two more hospitals in the Central Maine system are eager to establish satellites. They had 19 members participate in the Heart Walk and raised \$1,500. Things are definitely moving.

Chapter 152

Arlington, Texas



This chapter midway between Dallas and Ft. Worth has a vibrant 48-member average attendance at their monthly meetings. Among their 65 members are 15 accredited visitors who last year made 116 visits at Texas Health – Arlington Memorial Hospital. They only visit post-op patients as requested or invited.

Part of their high attendance has to do with the variety of programs at their monthly meetings. One featured a popular local columnist who is also a heart patient. Cardiac device makers shared developments in that field. A female minister who is also a heart patient shared some philosophy and insights. The hospital chaplain is a popular speaker every year. "We have also been entertained by various senior groups," said Jim Russell, chapter president. "A dance troupe of senior ladies performed at one of our gatherings. At last year's Christmas party we hosted a group of ladies who performed animated, scripted readings of gossipy, colloquial humor. You can see we strive for variety."



Chapter 152's Priscilla and Jim Russell with Kathy Krenzien (daughter of Virginia Rose) as they accept the Virginia Rose Heart of the Year award for 2009



Hospital liasons Susan Allen, Mickie Lee, Leah Prda from Chapter 152



Chapter 357 officers show off their charter

Ch. 152's newsletter, *Heart-to-Heart*, is produced for them for free by Matthew Parsons, a college student who, along with his Vietnamese mother, attends their meetings. The hospital prints it. Ch. 152 raises money in an interesting way: At every meeting they sell raffle tickets, three for \$2, then at the end of the meeting, the winner of the raffle gets half the pot, and the chapter keeps the other half.

Russell figures the chapter's success is the result of "a legacy of strong leadership and a core group of dedicated, reliable members, together with excellent support and representation by the hospital staff."


Russell took on the presidency because he felt there was an urgent need, "not because I didn't have enough to do." As he says, "My wife Priscilla, who serves in many capacities, and I did not have the time, but together we found some. Thankfully, many others share the burden, and we trust our results have not been too ragged!"

They soon decided that rehab staff would take the officer positions to help with the initial setup and development of the chapter. "We did this because as staff we can access NorthBay's organizational resources," Gordon said. "We have the ear of the doctors and other coordinators like social services, the volunteer department and marketing. That's something a volunteer would not be able to do."

Gordon and her team marshaled their resources to launch the chapter in September. In July, they started wearing buttons and handing out flyers to spread the word throughout the hospital. Membership was offered to all cardiac rehab patients as well as new inpatients. By the end of their initial membership drive, they had enough members that RD Mitchell pushed through the charter paperwork. At the first meeting, on September 29th, with 31 members in attendance, Mitchell presented the charter and swore in officers. The visiting program started in January when three members became accredited visitors. Of course, the downside to the staff-driven method is that the members may not take ownership of the chapter. Gordon and her team had to be scrupulous about making Ch. 357 a separate entity that is not "owned" by cardiac rehab.

"We may be starting this chapter, but we will be passing the baton when the chapter is at full roll," Gordon said. "We are working hard to put the pieces in place that will maintain the chapter for years to come. I tell members all the time, 'This is your chapter, not NorthBay's or cardiac rehab's. We are here to support you in getting started, but we want you take it and fly.'"

Chapter 357 Fairfield, California



This new California chapter went from just a good idea to chartered chapter in less than six months. They did that by doing things a bit unconventionally. Instead of volunteers driving the process, cardiac rehab staff at NorthBay Medical Center were the driving force behind the rapid implementation.

Debbie Gordon is the cardiac rehab nurse who took on this project, in addition to her professional duties. She was assisted by Lailanie Revelo, RN and Karen Loewe, RN. "At a meeting in April 2009, our cardiac rehab staff stated that we wanted a support group for our patients," Gordon said. Mended Hearts was mentioned, and they contacted the national office. Western RD George Mitchell responded.

Chapter 16 Lynchburg, Virginia



Ch. 16 is busy – so busy, in fact, they have put a dog to work! (You may have read about Maggie the therapy dog in the Spring 2009 *Heartbeat*.) In addition to Maggie, there are 52 accredited visitors, and

last year they made 2,317 visits at Lynchburg General Hospital. Ch. 16, which was chartered in 1989, has 240 members. Last year they averaged 50 members at their monthly meetings.

“We have one business meeting each year,” said vice-president Mike Donohue. The other meetings are focused on pertinent speakers, though they aren’t all CVD – oriented. Last year they had speakers on identity theft, medical insurance, wills and power of attorney. In addition, they have three monthly meetings disguised as social events – a July picnic, a Christmas party and a catered anniversary party that is an awards banquet where new officers are sworn in.

Ch. 16 has been successful in raising money. Over the years they have used a golf tournament, magazine subscription drives, silent auctions at the hospital and charity-day sales at big retailers, like Wal-Mart. These have proven effective as the chapter has provided money to many worthwhile community causes, including \$30,000 in scholarships to nursing and medical students.

Based in a rather rural area of western Virginia, the chapter works hard at publicity. “We distribute our brochure in the waiting rooms at all the area hospitals, doctors’ offices and rehab-related facilities,” Donohue said. “The hospital puts a notice of our meetings in the local paper.” In addition, they send newsletters (including membership applications) to every patient and family visited in the hospital for three months, and then give them a follow-up phone call.

“The major reason our chapter has been successful through the years is that the doctors and the hospital want us and are very helpful,” Donohue said. “Plus, our visiting members and the board members and all the committee people are committed and involved. We all want to give back in some way, and helping others is very satisfying.”

Chapter 360

Portsmouth, New Hampshire



Chartered this past December, Chapter 360 is the first MHI chapter in the Granite State. It is clear from talking to chapter president Dick Snowden that they plan to make a difference. They currently have 35 members, 18 accredited visitors, and last year while still a satellite of Hartford Ch. 9, they made 1,351 visits at Portsmouth Regional Hospital.

From the beginning they have been clear about their mission, resource needs, strategy and leadership requirements. “We spent many hours examining options and formulating a plan just like a business would develop a strategic plan,” Snowden said. “Our leadership team, now the chapter officers, has deep experience in running both profits and nonprofits.”

They started with a fundamental question, ‘what do we want to achieve?’ “After much discussion, it was clear that we wanted to make an impact,” Snowden said. “We have zero interest in growing for the sake of growth. We have no interest in being a social club, and it’s safe to say that ‘we don’t herd well.’”

They have made a conscious effort to recruit younger people into the chapter to match visitors with patients and increase credibility and impact.

In addition, they have made a diligent effort to gain credibility with the medical community in Portsmouth. “They know who we are and trust us,” Snowden said. “Surgeons have asked us to talk to seriously ill patients who were wavering about surgery. Case workers include us as part of the team as patients begin rehab. Just this week we were working with a case worker to find options for a homeless CABG patient.” It’s common for the nursing staff to brief visitors about patients so they know going in what the challenges are.



Chapter 16 celebrates Christmas


Ch. 360 has high standards for visitors. “The fact is that some people don’t have the right stuff,” Snowden said. “We will not compromise here. We routinely confer with the nursing staff, and when they point out mistakes or lack of credibility, we take corrective action.”

They take the same rigorous attitude toward the support group meetings that follow their monthly educational programs. Their lead facilitator is an experienced group facilitator, but the chapter has also designed a facilitator-training program and now has five trained facilitators. “In our support group meetings we dispense with the fluff and tackle issues that our surveys and conversations tell us our members want to discuss,” Snowden said.

“Some may view us as a group that bends the rules, and we’ve probably ruffled a few feathers. However, we believe that breakthrough results begin with breakthrough thinking,” Snowden said. “Our philosophy is clear: We’re looking for quality, not quantity. We don’t care to be the biggest chapter, but we are committed to being the best.”

Chapter 294

Aiken, South Carolina



With a name like the Aiken Hearts, you already know this chapter has the right attitude. They received the President’s Cup last year. Chartered in 2001, they have 122 members, with 53 accredited visitors. Not only do they visit patients in the hospital rooms, they visit in the cath lab waiting room and at the cardiac rehab center at the Wellness Center at the University of South Carolina – Aiken. Last year they made 2,747 patient visits and 363 family visits.

Visiting is Ch. 294’s whole purpose. “We have 53 active and dedicated visitors, and we would have many more if their medical conditions allowed,” said chapter president Patrick Boardman. “Size is not our goal; visiting is.”

Many of the chapter’s new members come from the twice-weekly visits to the cardiac rehab group at the

USCA Wellness Center. Another source for getting the word out is brochures in waiting rooms as well as a Speakers Bureau. They also donate AEDs and cardiac equipment regularly and generate a lot of publicity that way. “We feel that visiting, handing out PATH Packs and answering patient questions is our strongest publicity,” Boardman said.

Monthly meetings focus on business and heart-related topics. But there is also an open-forum time for members to address any topic of concern. “These meetings are important in creating a good social rapport among the members,” Boardman said. “Good communication leads to good understanding and good morale.”

Ch. 294 raises money through a golf tournament in September. (Planning starts in January.) They host 144 golfers in four-man teams. Lunch is catered and awards are given in several categories. “We usually raise \$12,000–\$14,000, which we use to buy equipment for the EMTs or cardiac rehab center or AEDs,” Boardman said. “The teamwork of the people in our chapter is what makes us successful,” Boardman said. “Our group has developed chemistry over the years. When we have a project or event, everyone pitches in. We exude teamwork. Everyone who joins gets that sense of fellowship, dedication and helpfulness. Our members get to the heart of what our organization means.”

Clearly successful chapters come in many colors and sizes. Each chapter is organized around delivering hope and concern, and they do it because it brings its own reward. As Pat Boardman of Ch. 294 said, “We achieve a wonderful feeling when we visit or donate an item to help heart patients. We are glad to be alive and to be able to give back to the community.”

The one thing all successful chapters have in common is people who are dedicated to alleviating fear and giving support. The way to make your chapter successful is for you to attend meetings, volunteer for a committee, become a visitor or run for an office. In the process, you will make new friends, expand your world, laugh a lot and improve your community. That’s a pretty good return on your investment. ❤️



Priscilla Soucy presents Chapter 360 President Dick Snowden with their new charter



Chapter 294 at the Aiken Regional Medical Center