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Operations Chief Flowers Receives Heart Association Honor, Walks the Talk

- Carolyn Flowers discovers her own risks, ends passion for chocolate
- [Plus!](#) Bus operators take wellness program to heart

By NED RACINE, Editor

(May 24, 2008) Carolyn Flowers, chief operations officer, received an honor from the American Heart Association (AHA) last month, but her biggest reward was appreciating her own health risks—even if it cost her some chocolate.



Role model: Carolyn Flowers, chief operations officer, is determined to be a healthy example for Metro Wellness Program participants. *Photo by Ned Racine*

At an AHA convention in Atlanta, Flowers was named a Power Ambassador by the association, for her success in bringing its "Power To End Stroke" information to thousands of Metro employees.

In an interview with AHA, Flowers noted that she is well aware that her African-American and Latino workers have a higher risk of heart disease, just as she is aware that stroke is the No. 3 killer in the nation.

According to AHA, African-Americans are at particularly high risk. In fact, African Americans have almost twice the risk of first-ever stroke compared with whites. Those 35 to 54 years old have four times the relative risk for stroke, partially due to increased rates of high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity.

Once Flowers became involved in the AHA's outreach efforts and Metro's Wellness Program, she realized she had a personal stake in a healthier lifestyle. Even though she knew heart disease ran in her family, she never linked that risk to herself.

Her grandmother died of a heart attack; her father had quadruple bypass surgery; and, despite his healthy appearance, her physically active brother has battled clogged arteries. After listening to a Power To End Stroke presentation three years ago at an American Heart Association meeting, Flowers knew that she had found her cause.

"When [AHA] said Metro was one of the employers they hoped to engage in the movement, I jumped at the chance because we really see the value in keeping our workforce productive, efficient and healthy. From that point on, I got involved," she said.

"AHA has gone out to each of our divisions throughout the transportation side. They've given us some sponsorship on the walking program. UTU and the healthcare carriers have also contributed \$42,000 to the Wellness Program."

In particular, she wants busy bus operators to know a healthier life is possible. To show her commitment to that idea and the Wellness Program overall, Flowers has attended the launch of the program at each division, as has UTU General Chairman James Williams.

If she could impress employees with one thing, it would be "that it takes commitment and dedication to change your lifestyle. As an agency—along with our union partners—we are putting in that commitment and dedication for the long haul."

"We've looked at the experience of other transportation agencies, and they said it usually takes three to five years [to see improvement]—this is a long-term commitment," she added.

How will she know the program is working? She will look to comments from employees and Metro's healthcare carriers.

Because Flowers promotes a healthier lifestyle throughout Operations, her freedom to indulge her love/hate affair with chocolate has evaporated. People notice if she buys a candy bar and are not above reminding her it is a poor choice.

"I haven't had a candy bar in five weeks," she said proudly and without tears. "I have to make sure that my diet is more exemplary."

In fact she is under pressure everywhere to walk the talk. Recently, at a Wellness Program kickoff at Central City Division 1, an operator who is member of her gym noticed her. "We haven't seen you there lately," he said to Flowers, responding to her defense of the event's chocolate-free hors d'oeuvres.

She quickly explained to the operator, "Listen, my trainer moved and I followed my trainer. When I finish my free lessons, I'll be back." Her gym mate seemed skeptical.

"You can't be out here telling us what to do if you're not working out," he replied.

"I swear, I'm at the gym," she answered.

"You never know who sees you," Flowers said. "I have to set an example."