

Champions of Plant-based Health

Mark and Wanda Huberman, the visionaries behind the National Health Association

By Carole Audet

Photos for this article courtesy the National Health Association

If you attend a National Health Association (NHA) conference, you'll be welcomed by Mark and Wanda Huberman. Mark is the NHA's president and editor of their award-winning magazine *Health Science*, which he helped create in 1978. Wanda is the executive director and organizer. Established in 1948, the NHA is a non-profit providing information about the benefits of a plant-exclusive diet.

For Mark and Wanda, it wasn't their mutual commitment to a vegan lifestyle that brought these two single parents together, but there's no doubt that their work with the NHA is now putting front and centre their love for sharing about the vibrant health that can be achieved through a plant-powered life. In fact, they are living proof.



Mark has always been plant-based. "My parents were pioneers in our health movement, raised me as a raw food vegan from birth and took me to my first NHA Conference when I was about 10 years old in 1961. I have attended nearly every NHA conference since," he shares.



For Mark's parents, Max and Ruth, going plant-based was a result of Mark not thriving as a child. By chance, someone recommended they go hear Dr. Gerald Benesh give a talk in Cleveland. Benesh was an advocate for a whole food plant-based diet and recommended avoiding all processed foods. After doing some research on their own, Max and Ruth were all in with the advice given by Benesh, and shortly after young Mark began to thrive.

Wanda, on the other hand, admittedly was "pretty far from vegan." Growing up, her family raised pigs, cows, chickens, rabbits, and horses in addition to growing vegetables. As a child, Wanda doesn't recall ever shopping with her family in a grocery store. When Wanda met Mark in 1989, she was an independent career woman who wasn't about to let anyone tell her what to eat.

While they dated, he maintained his vegan way of life and Wanda continued to consume animal products. When he hosted her for dinner, he often served fresh salads with homemade dressing. Wanda didn't know that Mark's diet consisted of only plant foods, and she continued to eat a standard American diet.

While courting, Wanda's daughter was scheduled to have her tonsils and adenoids removed. One evening, Wanda stopped at the Natural Health Foods and Barbell Center—the store owned by Mark's parents—and mentioned this to Max. He gave Wanda a book called *Sugar Blues* and suggested that she eliminate sugar, dairy and meat from her daughter's diet and increase her vegetable and fruit intake. Wanda followed this advice as best she could and three months later at her daughter's pre-op appointment the doctor became enraged at the nurse for bringing him the wrong records because there was no sign that her daughter needed the surgery.

"That was quite an 'aha' moment. Once I changed her lifestyle, she didn't have the routine ear infections and sore throat and she



didn't need that surgery. I thought maybe I'm going to make a few more changes, but even with that strong 'why' to live this lifestyle, I was really slow to fully adopt it," recalls Wanda.

Mark and Wanda got married in early June of 1991, at which point Wanda was still not committed to a healthy plant-based diet. Later that month Mark suggested they attend the annual National Health Association conference. Mark's greatest passion has always been supporting the work of the NHA; he became a board member when he was 18 and he was the youngest to be elected president in 1977. Since then, he's served several terms as president, including his current term of more than 10 years.

For Wanda, attending the conference for the first time was only the beginning of her transition. "It was a learning journey. That first summer we were married, I went to the conference and I'm inundated with 400 people assuming that I live this lifestyle because I'm with the president of the organization and hanging out with the doctors and their spouses. And my head's spinning with all of this information. I made pretty big changes pretty quickly after the event with my daughter and getting the education at the conference, but I didn't fully get the unprocessed part. It was enough of a change to just eliminate all animal products."

While Wanda was eating plant-based, she was still consuming



1961 NHA Convention, Chicago - Mark Huberman, 10 years old

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Dr. Klapar, Wanda Huberman, Alese Jones, Brenda Davis, Jayne Goddard, Dr. Frank Sabatino, Dr. Stephan Esser, Mark Huberman

processed foods that contain added sugar, oil, and salt. In 2011, when she was 51, Wanda found herself feeling less than optimum. She had put on 50 pounds due to a combination of eating processed foods—despite it being plant-based—and a more sedentary lifestyle. Having attended the NHA conferences year after year and understanding a diet for excellent health, Wanda decided she could do better to feel better.

She signed up for the TrueNorth Health Center program and travelled to Santa Rosa, California for a six-week stay. The program recommends medically supervised water fasting when it's a fit for the individual, and Wanda started this journey by undergoing a 19-day fast. This was followed by what is called a refeeding program, additional education, and exercise instructions to ensure that Wanda did not lose muscle mass as she aged.

"I had what I've now learned is neuro adaptation, where you start

to love the food. Now I love food without salt, oil, and sugar and it's unprocessed whole food. I lost the extra 50 pounds within six months of returning home and following a healthier lifestyle as the NHA has been advocating since 1948. As I started to feel better about myself and relate to the foods I was eating, my awareness and compassion for animals got stronger, as well as my desire to take care of this planet for many more generations," Wanda explains.

While the NHA focused primarily on health initially, they have now incorporated the benefits of a vegan lifestyle on the planet and for animals. Conferences host such speakers as Dr. Michael Klapar, Victoria Moran and Gene Bauer who share about compassion toward animals. "I have long been a champion of animal rights, opposing factory farming and laboratory testing of animals," says Mark.

Wanda adds, "If we don't take care of the animals, that's a whole

different problem. And we need to stop animal agriculture for the health of our planet. In my mind, you can't separate it. Once I made the connection with animal rights, I couldn't unknow it."

Wanda retired from her position as regional claims manager of a casualty insurance company in January 2020 and became the NHA's full-time Executive Director. She's still running the conferences each year and makes certain to include speakers from outside the health and wellness area.

"We opened up to people who it's their life's work to talk about animal rights and the planet. It's being able to step outside your box and step outside the comfort zone of what you know. Over the years, the organization has grown. We have more members than we've ever had. Our conference is sold out," shares Wanda.

Today, NHA boasts about 3,500 paid members, and they make up around 70% of conference attendees.

Wanda adds, "Now, because of COVID, we've gone virtual. I'm



The Huberman family

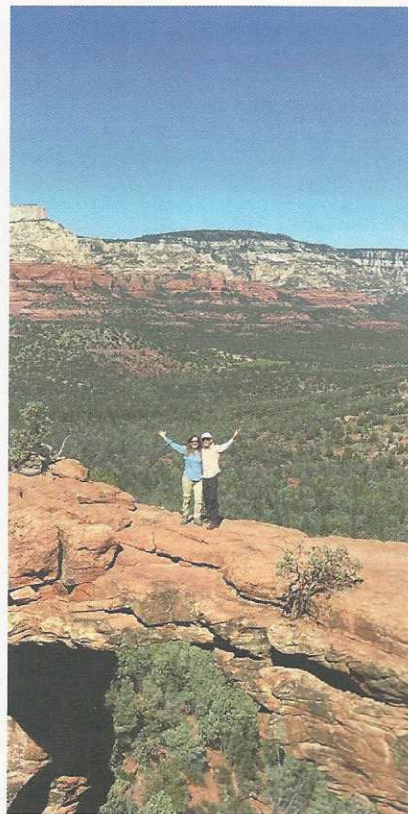


Images above. Scenes from the National Health Associations plant-based cruise.

expecting a couple thousand people will attend virtually because we have this incredible list of speakers.”


Wanda works with the hotel chefs, instructing them on how to prepare the food that will be served during the conference weekend. She goes so far as to prepare dishes herself to show the chefs and demonstrate the mouth-watering flavours achieved without added salt, oil, and sugar.


The NHA now offers plant-based cruises and Wanda works with cruise lines that are winning awards for sustainability. Additionally, the Health Science Podcast, hosted by Dr. Frank Sabatino, NHA Director of Health Education, launched in December 2022.



Wanda and Mark don't proselytize their way of life; in Mark's case, he went so far as to marry a woman who had yet to commit to the lifestyle. To spread our vegan message, perhaps living life full of vitality well into our old age is the most powerful tool we have at our disposal to inspire others to make the transition. ●

Learn more about Mark and Wanda, the NHA and *Health Science Magazine* at healthscience.org

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