

Rip Esselstyn:

If you've wanted to join our Plant-Strong Meal Planner, now is the time. We have just launched our first ever 14-day free trial period for anyone who visits mealplanner.plantstrong.com and uses the code "twoweeks" at checkout. That's two, spelled T-W-O-W-E-E-K-S, "twoweeks."

Rip Esselstyn:

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Rip Esselstyn:

Wow. Wow, wow. We are just coming off a spectacular Kitchen Rescue event. It was our third live virtual event of 2020, where we had close to 2,000 people tune in with my family. And the whole goal of the weekend was to really set up people's kitchens for sweet success, turn them into the sanctuaries that they really deserve to be during these really uncertain times, especially as we go into the holidays and into 2021.

Rip Esselstyn:

And throughout the weekend, we shared several personal stories of people just like you who have adopted positive daily habits that have allowed them to lose weight and even reverse many of their chronic Western diseases. Today, we're going to feature one of those stories.

Rip Esselstyn:

This is the tale, I should say true tale, of how Ken Lander and I met, which is nothing short of astounding. In 2017, at 430-plus pounds, Ken was diagnosed with a battery of lifestyle diseases, including heart disease that included severe blockage of several of his coronary arteries, an enlarged heart that was working at less than 10% of capacity. He was truly a mess.

Rip Esselstyn:

And when he found out, the first thing that he did, he went on Google and typed in "reverse heart disease." And of the 200-plus books that came up, he randomly picked Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease by my father, Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn, Jr. And literally at the exact same time, and unknown to all of us, Ken and I had a mutual friend who was trying to connect us. I think it's fair to say that it was fate. And the rest, as they say, is history in the making.

Rip Esselstyn:

Ken is now over three years into his new life and has a wonderful, glorious heart that is allowing him to run half marathons, row, and just given him a lifestyle that he thought was forever in the past. And all of this without the need for surgery. And as you'll hear, he has been able to get a little more creative and flexible with his meal planning since his chronic illnesses have disappeared.

Rip Esselstyn:

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So from his coffee farm in beautiful Costa Rica, Ken shared this transformational story at the Kitchen Rescue event this weekend. And today I'm going to share it with you. Thanks.

Rip Esselstyn:

Ken Lander, I want to welcome you to the Plant-Strong Primer, Kitchen Rescue edition. You and your story and what you've done over the last, what, three and a half, four years, is nothing less than remarkable, but it's a testament to what can happen with the power of plant-based nutrition. But for starters, Ken, ... And you have a coffee plantation, correct?

Ken Lander:

That's correct. I'm a coffee farmer. I've been a coffee farmer for 15 years.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow. And that's actually how we met because we met through ... I have one of my best friends here in Austin, [John Collicutt 00:05:07], is in the tea business. Right?

Ken Lander:

That's right.

Rip Esselstyn:

And you guys know each other. You're coffee, he's tea. And he came to me probably four years ago and said, "There's this guy. He is such an amazing guy, and I think he could use you and your father's help." And-

Ken Lander:

But the crazy thing about it was on a Saturday night after I got home from the hospital, I typed in "heart disease and diet" into my Kindle. And there were 247 books, and I picked one of them, and it was Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease by Caldwell Esselstyn. Two days later, I'm in a meeting with my team in Atlanta, who had just gotten back from meeting you two weeks earlier at an event with John Collicutt, and you gave them an autographed copy of that very same book. And through that, your mom sent me an email six weeks later, and that's how I met you.

Rip Esselstyn:

Why were you searching for Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease? What did you have going on?

Ken Lander:

Well, I just got off the plane the night before, and it turns out I was diagnosed with stage three heart failure. And after all the tests were done, my ejection fraction was a 19, 20. A normal's 51. I had coronary heart disease. My widowmaker was 90% blocked, and the one to the left of it was 80% blocked. And I had all of the things. The heart was beating quickly. Oh, and then my heart was swollen-

Rip Esselstyn:

Enlarged.

Ken Lander:

My ventricular wall was swollen 200%. So they were already talking about a pacemaker, and I actually heard the word "transplant" in my first visit in the hospital.

Ken Lander:

And so I typed into my Kindle, "Heart disease and diet." First time I ever heard your last name, Rip, was in that. I read the book between 6:00 and 10:00 in the morning. And I told my wife, [Yamilet 00:07:09], "Today, I'm going to have my first whole food, plant-based, no oil meal," and I haven't violated it once in 42 months. Not one time.

Rip Esselstyn:

That is insanely amazing. What did your dietary regime look like before that?

Ken Lander:

Well, can you hear my accent? I mean, I was a redneck from Monroe, Georgia that would eat a whole half of a fried chicken. I would plow through a steak at a steak house. I was carnivorous. Anything that you could eat that I don't eat now, would not even think about eating, that's what I ate every day, all day.

Rip Esselstyn:

And do you miss any of that stuff?

Ken Lander:

Not a bit. Not a bit. Actually, it makes me sick to my stomach to see someone eating steak now. I was 430 pounds when I got your dad's book.

Rip Esselstyn:

Did you have any kind of prediabetes or type two diabetes, or no?

Ken Lander:

No, I did not have any sugar problems. That's the weirdest thing.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, that's pretty spectacular. Okay. Now, you started in on this journey, and how did it go? Like where were you after a year, two years, three years? You're now, what, almost four years in, right?

Ken Lander:

I'm 42 months in, yeah.

Rip Esselstyn:

42 months. Okay, little [crosstalk 00:08:36]-

Ken Lander:

One stage that I'll tell you because you're going to remember it really well. I went back for my first checkup in May, and my cardiologist is freaking out. He's saying, "This is impossible. Your heart"-

Rip Esselstyn:

Wait, stop for a sec. May, and this is how many months later?

Ken Lander:

This is four months later.

Rip Esselstyn:

Okay, okay.

Ken Lander:

Four months later. And I go in, and he tells me that my ejection fraction after doing the test three times had gone up 86% in four months. And he couldn't get over ... My heart had actually shrunk by 50%, the abnormalities. It was only 50% shrunk now. And he was freaking out. And I asked him if I could start exercising because I was doing cardiac rehab. That's all I was doing. And he said, "Yes."

Ken Lander:

And so I remember two things that happened in that thing. I made two phone calls. One was to my internist, who was looking for me in the hospital. And while I was waiting for him, I called you. Okay?

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, yeah.

Ken Lander:

And you immediately conferenced in your dad. I don't know if you remember or not.

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh, I do.

Ken Lander:

And in that call, he invites me to come and speak at Plant-Stock that year, in August of 2017. I'm a heart failure patient, and he wants me ... I said, "What, are you crazy?" So at that point I had lost a hundred pounds in four months. By the time I got to Plant-Stock in August of 2017, I had lost 138 pounds. And by the time I got to my next checkup in October, I had lost 160 pounds, and my cardiologist says, "There's no past or present evidence that you've ever had a heart problem. You're going to die of something, but it ain't going to be a heart problem." Ten months.

Rip Esselstyn:

Now, at one of those appointments, and I want you to share this, your cardiologist said, "Hey, wait here. I need to talk to you." Will you share that story?

Ken Lander:

Yeah. That was in the May one. And I'm a guy of faith, and I was actually ... I remember walking in, and the cardiologist looked at me, and I heard him say to the nurse, "How much has that fat guy lost," in Spanish, because he didn't know that I spoke Spanish. And told him, "Well, the fat guy's lost a hundred pounds."

Ken Lander:

And so I get on the bed, and he's just a great guy. He's a super great cardiologist. Young, good looking, cyclist, the whole deal. Talking, talking, talking. And so he's going through his thing, and I realize he cycles it like three times. And then he's texting, and then another doctor comes in [inaudible 00:11:27] I'm going, "Oh, this is not good," and I'm really praying hard.

Ken Lander:

And he says, "Ken, I need to see you in my office. It's going to take me about 40 minutes, but I need to see you." And I went sheet-white, Rip. I had tears rolling down my eyes. And he grabs my hand, he goes, "Ken, you don't understand." He said, "It's as someone took the heart out of you and put a new one in." He said, "I can't understand it." And he says, "I need to talk to you about what's happened in the last four months."

Ken Lander:

And so we go down to his office, and I start telling him about Esselstyn. And I start telling him about endothelial health, and I start telling him that I eat my greens and I eat my balsamic vinegar on top of it, and all the things. And he's like, "Where did you learn all this?" I said, "In a book that I got on the internet. By the way, the doctor's getting to be a friend of mine now, and his son at least, I've talked to him a couple of times." And he's like, "Well, all you're saying makes all the health sense in the world, but how is it possible that you've gone from a stage three heart failure patient now to the stage two heart failure patient in four months?"

Rip Esselstyn:

So 42 months in. Can you give me a rundown on where you are with ... How much weight have you lost? Where's your blood pressure, cholesterol, resting heart rate? All those things.

Ken Lander:

All top of mind. All top of mind, brother. I keep all those metrics. I lost 201 pounds. I hit a plateau about 10 months ago, and so I started lifting really hard and to try to push myself out of it. I gained 20 pounds, but 17 of it was muscle weight. And so actually, I am now ... I've lost 201 pounds of fat, and I've gained about 17 pounds of muscle weight since I started. And I'm now on the last rig to get down the last 69 pounds of fat, so then I'll be like a 12% body fat. Right now I'm about a 34% body fat.

Ken Lander:

Cholesterol, 125 total. Half of it LDLs, half of it HDLs. My LDLs have been below 70 now for two years. Blood pressure, last year, the yearly average was about 115/65. Resting heart rate is relative because now I'm fighting with my cardiologist to get off my meds, but every time I get off more meds my resting heart rate goes back up for a little bit and then it comes back down. But right now, without meds, on beta blockers, I'm right about a 52.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yup. Yup. That's like an athlete, baby. Because the theme of this weekend is the Kitchen Rescue, I want you ... How did you make this work? When the rubber hits the road, what are you eating for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? How are you incorporating six or seven helpings of green leafies a day? What does your kitchen look like?

Ken Lander:

It's really simple. I can tell you right now, the biggest things that I eat are oatmeal on carb days. Because right now I'm really trying to eat less carbs to kind of build my muscle. I need more protein. Blueberries. I eat pounds and pounds and pounds and pounds of frozen blueberries every day. We have a fresh garden here, so I eat the six to 10 cups cooked of green leafies a day.

Ken Lander:

But what I've found is really cool ... This is the thing that I love more than anything now that I eat. I take a big roll of kale. I cook it like your dad says to cook it. Right? And your mom. I chop it up. I put a half of avocado in it and mash that all into it. It makes kind of like a kale ...

Rip Esselstyn:

Kale slaw.

Ken Lander:

Kale slaw, guacamole thing. And then I use that as the base to put on like tempeh or tofu or cashews. Just a few cashews if I'm trying to get some protein. Even a marinara sauce. That actually becomes the base of my bowl instead of a carb on the bottom. And sometimes [inaudible 00:16:05] carb. I'll put rice in with it or whatever. That's one of the things that I do a lot of. A lot.

Ken Lander:

And then baked potatoes. Oh, my God. A big russet baked potato, cut it down the middle, and put that kale-guacamole thing in the middle of it, and it's phenomenal. And it also has a lot of nutritional yeast in it, too.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yup. Yup. Do you make a lot of things just in bowls?

Ken Lander:

Yes. A lot of bowls. We live in Costa Rica, so rice and beans is about as common as eggs and bacon in the United States. And so lots of beans on those bowls, lots of brown rice, lots of quinoa, lots of bulgur wheat, all that stuff.

Rip Esselstyn:

What do you do? Do you get any pushback from friends or family? And if so, how do you handle that?

Ken Lander:

Well, that's been a big issue for me because I'm a bit of a proselytizer. I have to kind of hold myself back on my faith sometimes, and I have to hold myself back on my plant eating. And those things are very, very important to me. And I'll tell you that when I find someone that I love, and I see them suffering, I just can't wait. But the thing is, that's funny about it, is that I never bring it up, they always bring it up.

Ken Lander:

And then they bring it up, and I'm like, "Well, do you really want to know?" And they're like, "Well, what are you going to tell me? I have to eat just plants?" I'm like, "That's what I'm going to tell you. It's that simple." And they're like, "I could never do that. I could never do that." I say, "But how long have you known me? I mean, I was almost dead, and you told me I need to do something, go to the doctor. And now I can do a half marathon. I'm within reach of it now." And they're like, "What do you want me to do?" I'm like, "I want you to try eating plants."

Rip Esselstyn:

You've been really patient with this, haven't you? I mean, you're in 42 months now you said, right?

Ken Lander:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rip Esselstyn:

42 months. Slow and steady wins the race.

Ken Lander:

42 months and a 14-month plateau where I didn't lose one pound. In fact, I gained weight. I was gaining muscle, but still I hadn't lost a pound.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yup. Yup. Well, and look at what you have to show for it. You've got a brand new heart. Right?

Ken Lander:

Right.

Rip Esselstyn:

Almost literally and figuratively. You're, what, 115 cholesterol, 105 over whatever blood pressure, 34 size pants. I mean, it's a testament to you working the program and your tenacity, and really, I think wanting to live. Right? I mean, you saw the writing on the wall.

Ken Lander:

Yeah. You know what it is, Rip? I'll tell you. When I met you originally, I saw your passion, right? And I wanted the passion because I was hurting, and I was trying to survive. Right? Dude, I just don't do this for me anymore. I'm not doing this just for me. And I know you're not doing it just for you and your health journey and the people around you's health journeys. We're not doing it just for us. I mean, every time I actually make a good decision on food, I'm giving someone else the justification, the motivation, and actually loving them enough to say, "You can do this, too." And so I eat for other people now.

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Rip Esselstyn:

Ken is no longer doing this for himself. He is getting healthy to help others. How beautiful is that? And even more beautiful, these results that Ken has achieved, and thousands of others, are absolutely typical. It's just a matter of working the program. You work the program, you follow the seven pillars, and the program works. You don't look for loopholes. You don't look for ways to kind of skirt the program. You just do it, and this is what happens.

Rip Esselstyn:

Let us know how we can help you lay the groundwork for a healthy 2021. Reach out to us at plantstrong.com and take advantage of all of our recipes and resources. Peace. Engine 2. Keep it plant strong.

Rip Esselstyn:

The Plant-Strong Podcast team includes Laurie Kortowich, Ami Mackey, Patrick Gavin, Wade Clark, and Carrie Barrett. I want to thank my parents, Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn, Jr. and Ann Crile Esselstyn for creating a legacy that will be carried on for generations and being willing to go against the current and trudge upstream to the causation. We are all better for it.