

## **Close to the Heart – Employees Walk For a Cure**

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Richard Ashley, director of design engineering, brings heartfelt enthusiasm to the annual Forrest/Lamar County Heart Walk sponsored by the American Heart Association. He has been the cornerstone of South Mississippi Electric's Employee Heart Walk Team, participating in the fundraising event every year since 2004, when he underwent heart bypass surgery.

"My heart surgery in 2004 was somewhat of a wake-up call to the fact that I was not to escape my family history of heart disease," Ashley said. "My father died of a heart attack at age 37 when I was very young, and my older brother had heart bypass surgery at age 38. In the spring of 2004, I started to experience chest pains with the slightest exertion. I would walk from my car in the back parking lot at SMEPA to my office in the Engineering building and would experience chest pains for 2 to 3 minutes. I knew something was not right, and a subsequent heart catheterization confirmed that I had a 70% blockage in my left main artery.

"The doctor explained that stents or other non-invasive techniques were not recommended and he suggested immediate coronary artery bypass graft surgery for the left main and two other arteries. The surgery was performed on June 30, 2004 and recovery and cardiac rehabilitation lasted about eight weeks. Before and after my surgery, I was impressed by the current state of technology for cardiac care and the knowledge of the nurses, technicians, and doctors.

"Talking with my brother after my heart catheterization and later after my surgery, I observed how much these procedures had improved since his bypass surgery some 20 years earlier. The advances in cardiac care are truly amazing, and research continues to produce breakthroughs in diagnosis, treatment, care, and prevention of heart disease. The American Heart Association, in my opinion, does a great job not only in funding research but, more importantly, providing support and education on the local level."

Of the \$5,000 that the SME Heart Walk Team raised this year, Richard personally raised \$1,500, making him one of the Top Walkers for the local American Heart Association chapter. His success story was featured in the October issue of the Forrest/Lamar County Heart Walk Newsletter.

"Being featured in the Heart Walk Newsletter was truly an honor," Richard said. "I set a goal to raise \$800 this year, but I was skeptical of reaching it due to the current economic conditions. To be able to nearly double my goal was a huge success.

"Using the American Heart Association's Kintera web site, I used e-mail tools to send out blast e-mails to many business associates, family members, and other contacts with whom I have great relationships," Richard said. "I personalized my requests with an update on my health as a heart disease survivor and provided details of the 2009 Heart Walk and the efforts of the SMEPA Heart Walk Team. I sent the e-mails to nearly 70 contacts and received my first contribution within an hour."

The 2009 SME Heart Walk Team consisted of more than 25 employees and an additional 25 friends and family members, making it the largest SME Team to participate in the event to date.

“We had a phenomenal team this year,” Richard added. “We began meeting in May to discuss possible events to raise money and ideas about how to raise awareness of heart disease for employees. We set our goal at \$4,000, and were thrilled when we exceeded our goal and reached \$5,000.

“We again conducted the IP Hotel and Casino Getaway Raffle and the always popular Gun Raffle, and had great success with these, as usual. We added a t-shirt sale this year that ended up being our biggest money maker. The employees did an outstanding job supporting our team and the American Heart Association, and their contributions are greatly appreciated. The team could not have met our goal without the support of employees and management.”

Richard also represented the Team at safety meetings and spoke to employees about taking heart-health seriously by choosing a healthy diet, exercising, and visiting the doctor. He hoped that his personal experience with heart disease would resonate with his co-workers and encourage them to begin taking steps toward a healthy lifestyle.

“Other than raising money for research and development, the role of the American Heart Association is to educate the public on heart disease,” Richard said. “That includes knowing the various heart conditions, as well as warning signs and ways to prevent those conditions. As the SMEPA Heart Walk Team, it is our job to educate the employees. I hope that through this campaign we have made an impact on the employees, as well as helping so many heart disease patients with the money we raised.”