

Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project: Perspective from a medical center board member

From 2009 to 2018, the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation® (MHIF) conducted real-world population health research with Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project (HONU) in rural New Ulm, Minn. HONU is an award-winning population health initiative that MHIF originally designed in partnership with key community partners, including New Ulm Medical Center, as a 10-year demonstration project to identify and deliver the best interventions to reduce cardiovascular disease at a population level. The project continues today as a community-owned health initiative focused on three significant and widespread health issues: 1) Healthy lifestyles across the lifespan, 2) Mental health and 3) Addiction and risky use of substances.



Hugh Nierengarten, JD

Here we share some insights from former New Ulm resident Hugh Nierengarten, who now serves on the MHIF Board of Directors. He served on the New Ulm Medical Center Board when HONU was first being proposed and also served a 10-year term as a board member for New Ulm Medical Center's parent organization, Allina Health.

Q: After 10 years of the Heart of New Ulm in the community, what's the most surprising outcome for you to see?

Nierengarten: It's been sort of a three-stage surprise at the end of 10 years. Number one, I'm surprised that it's actually still going after a decade. These kinds of initiatives have a tendency to start with a splash, reach an early crest, and then peter out. And that really hasn't happened with the Heart of New Ulm. I think it's maintained traction into what is now the 11th year. It's still active and becoming more ingrained into the nature of the community.

Another thing that has surprised me is the level of national attention that this undertaking has achieved; it has achieved a level of success that gives it national notoriety. Finally, the last thing that has surprised me is that while it's a big needle to move in a community of 14,000 people, the needle has been moved. There have been some empirical results that show that the program has had a beneficial effect on the overall health of the community. At the point where I was departing from New Ulm, it was noticeable to me that people were much healthier in their eating and exercise habits and much healthier in their attention to their physical welfare in general. That's really sort of a mammoth change in attitude when you talk about applying it to a broad range of people in a very ethnically homogenous community.

Q: When the concept for HONU was first presented to the New Ulm Medical Center board, what did you think about it? What were the discussions? What was your initial reaction?

Nierengarten: Frankly, at that point, I was skeptical. I was born and raised in New Ulm, and I had practiced law in New Ulm for over 30 years. I was pretty well acquainted with the nature and lifestyle of the people in the New Ulm, and it was not conducive to heart health by any stretch of the imagination. So it was an interesting challenge. Because what we're really doing is

Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation's Population Health Vision

To simplify and accelerate rural community health improvement efforts for sustainability and impact.

Heart of New Ulm Project Health Care Awards

2018 Winner:

Heart Healthy Stroke Free Award from the National Forum for Heart Disease & Stroke Prevention

2014 Winner:

American Hospital Association NOVA award

2014 Winner:

Community Benefit Award (small hospital category) from the Minnesota Hospital Association

challenging a group of people who had a set of lifestyle characteristics that was not conducive to the ultimate goals of The Heart of New Ulm Project. So it really, really required a comprehensive approach to health in the city of New Ulm. I saw that as a real challenge harking back to the old maxim that, "You can always tell a German, but you can't tell him much." It just occurred to me that this was going to be a tough, tough row to hoe.

Q: Despite your healthy skepticism, what made you think the project had potential?

Nierengarten: Two things about it suggested to me that this project had potential. Number one, and I say this without reservation, it was the then-president of New Ulm Medical Center, Lori Wightman. I never saw her engage in anything that she wasn't committed to getting done and getting done right.

The second thing that encouraged me that it was a project that had potential was the involvement of the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation. It occurred to me that you needed to bring some heavy hitters in terms of name recognition, in terms of research expertise, and in terms of medical knowledge to bear to get this project off the ground. While I was skeptical in the first instance, I was encouraged by those two elements' involvement.

Q: To what do you attribute some of the project's success?

Nierengarten: It was really a variety of things ... you had several legs on this stool going at the same time. You had the medical center encouraging the medical side of this thing. You had the restaurant community that was getting motivated to deal with the nutrition side. You were getting the city and the park and recreation department involved in motivating the healthy activities side. More specifically, the creation of an extensive bike network in this community. It really took a lot of involvement by the community and the City of New Ulm to get that up and running. You had a lot of grassroots assistance in motivating people to buy healthy at grocery stores and that kind of thing. So it was really an interesting process of bringing the community together and focusing on a goal that I thought was really a stretch.

Q: What are you most proud of as it relates to the project?

Nierengarten: Well, I think it's interesting that you could motivate a community to become engaged sort of holistically about health, and its fallout has been beyond the confines of the New Ulm Medical Center and really has had a more comprehensive, beneficial effect for the community in general.

Q: Did you personally adopt any healthier lifestyle habits?

Nierengarten: I was like everybody else in New Ulm; I was sort of coasting. I can tell you that nine years ago I quit smoking after 40 years. In large part, that was as a result of the motivation that came from the Heart of New Ulm. That's been a big change in my life. I do pay much more attention to my eating habits. We've almost totally eliminated processed foods from our diet as a family. We are much more conscious about eliminating unnecessary fat and processed foods from our diet, and much more focused on fruits and vegetables than we used to be.

I'm also exercising more than I ever did before. Typically, when you get to my age, people tend to put on weight. I have not put on any weight. I've dropped weight, as a matter of fact, in the last 10 years. So personally, I've taken to heart many of the lessons from the Heart of New Ulm process and have applied them to my life to my benefit. I felt really supported by the project itself.

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