

Agent of Change

BY LAURA RANDALL

Make the world a better place by taking chances and challenging the status quo. That's the approach that guides the philanthropic contributions of Edythe and Eli Broad, who for the last decade have used their considerable resources and influence to improve urban public education, foster public appreciation of contemporary art, and advance scientific and medical research in Los Angeles and beyond.

So it wasn't unusual when Edythe Broad wanted to know more after hearing C. Noel Bairey Merz, MD, director of the Women's Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai, speak about women's heart disease at Hillcrest Country Club two years ago. After the luncheon, the two women chatted about their families and public school education, then moved on to Dr. Bairey Merz's efforts to increase awareness and understanding of a disease that kills more women every year than breast cancer and all other cancers combined. Her interest piqued, Mrs. Broad invited the cardiologist to her home for tea, and they discussed ways the Broads might help the Women's Heart Center do even more to fight a disease whose prevention and screening methods have long targeted men.

This led to the establishment at the end of 2006 of the Edythe L. Broad Women's Heart Research Fellowship, an endowment that funds a scientist devoted exclusively to research. It is a perfect fit for the Broad family's goal of championing projects that take intelligent risks.

"Our foundation looks for people who don't just work with the status quo—people who have a different approach or do something that hasn't been done or do something better," says Mrs. Broad. "We call them change agents. And that's what I saw in Dr. Merz."

The \$1 million gift, the largest ever given to the

Women's Heart Center at that time, supports ongoing research in areas such as microvascular dysfunction, a disease of the small arteries in the heart with hidden plaque in the artery walls that is often hard to detect. Yet, it affects nearly two-thirds of women with chest pain.

Today, the Women's Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai is among the rarest of resources: a facility devoted to the "full triad" of clinical care, education, and research of women's heart disease, notes Dr. Bairey Merz, who also holds the Women's Guild Endowed Chair in Women's Health at Cedars-Sinai. One of the center's chief goals is to help women reduce their chances of heart disease through preventive approaches, including state-of-the-art screening and specialized diagnostic testing.

Women make up the majority—at 53 percent—of the heart disease patients in the United States. However, many go undiagnosed because traditional testing methods are geared toward men. Heart centers that target women are fairly new, according to Dr. Bairey Merz. "If you go to major cities, you will find a few places that say that they have a women's heart center, but it is almost always clinical care, maybe some education, rarely any substantial research," she says. "I don't say that with pride, and hope that Cedars-Sinai's leadership in this area will inspire others to fully develop women's heart centers."

With encouragement from Dr. Merz and others, Edythe Broad gave her name to the research fellowship in the hope that it would move others to lend their own support to the cause. "I used to think being an anonymous donor was better, and there's an advantage to that, but there is something about the publicity that is helpful and does make other people think about what they can do to make a difference," she says.



Indeed, support for women's heart disease has grown and strengthened in the last decade. In addition to Edythe Broad, an increasing number of Los Angeles businesswomen, philanthropists, and community leaders are playing key roles in raising awareness and support for the Women's Heart Center. Connie Austin, who first introduced Edythe Broad to Dr. Bairey Merz, Dana Kates, Sharon Glaser, Sandy Krause, Jackie Rosenberg, Marilyn Lewis, and Eilene Rothman lead the list of forward-looking visionaries.

They cite Dr. Bairey Merz's role as a tireless advocate and mesmerizing speaker as a driving motivation—as well as the often-tragic stories and statistics linked to women and heart disease: It is the leading killer of U.S. women; nearly two-thirds of women who die of a heart attack showed no prior symptoms; and research shows that men have long tended to be diagnosed and treated more aggressively than women.

"This is women making a difference and women leading by doing," says Dr. Bairey Merz. "I think there's a perception that turns into reality when you see women

"I think there's a perception that turns into reality when you see women like Edythe being strong, taking a leadership role, and saying 'I think this is important, I'm willing to do this.' This is how movements get started." —DR. C. NOEL BAIREY MERZ

PICTURED HERE WITH EDYTHE BROAD (RIGHT)

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One recent afternoon at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Mrs. Broad and Dr. Bairey Merz spoke of their own experiences and hopes for the Women's Heart Center in the years ahead. "I've always thought women got the short end of the medical stick in some areas," says Mrs. Broad. "When I was growing up, almost all the doctors were men. I never had a female physician until I was well into adulthood." She recalls a brilliant childhood girlfriend who was discouraged from going to medical school solely because of her gender. "The dean of admissions said 'Why should we give you a place? You'll get married and have

children, and you're denying a place to a man who has to support a family." She went to medical school anyway, Mrs. Broad adds. "She's a very good doctor."

Dr. Bairey Merz offers her own eye-opening statistics about the study of women and heart disease: "We are 50 years behind men in terms of knowledge about optimal screening, diagnosis, and treatment regimens for women." That's in part because for years the medical community studied men and heart disease and assumed that women would be the same. As it turns out, "women have on average a lower muscle mass than men, and we often miss things with standardized cardiac testing protocols," she says. "If you don't do the research, you don't know."

The cardiologist's goals for women's heart disease include getting more gender-specific testing into the routine physician's office and establishing more women's heart centers around the country. She points to the case of Lori Kupetz, a then 39-year-old mother of two daughters, as an example of a woman with heart disease who almost fell through the cracks. After enduring months of chest pain and multiple tests and doctor visits that yielded no answers, Mrs. Kupetz was told it must be in her head and sent home. At the Women's Heart Center

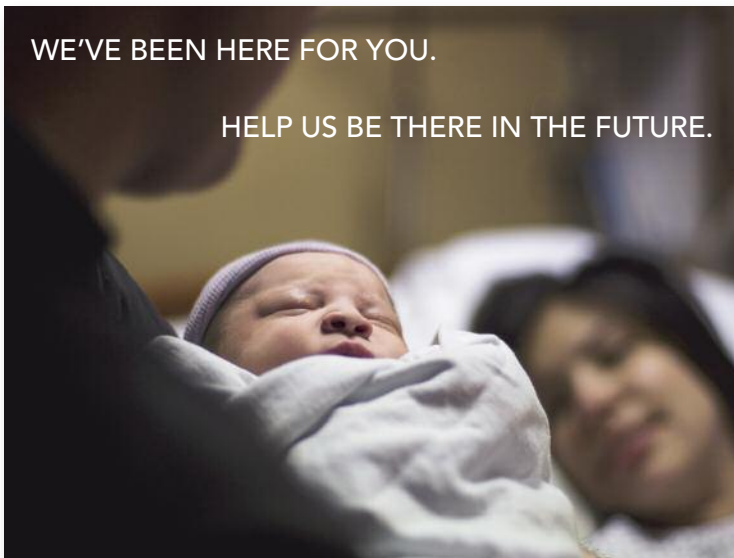
at Cedars-Sinai, she was put on a *bicycle stress echo*, a test that measures the heart function before and after exercise. This test is better for women than standard stress tests because it uses an exercise protocol that is graded to the women's physiology. "We found a critical blockage in her heart's main artery; one that we call the widow maker because it is lethal if not treated," says Dr. Bairey Merz. Mrs. Kupetz had bypass surgery the following day and has since resumed her life as a young—and healthy—wife and mother.

Dr. Bairey Merz estimates that there are "decades of work" that needs to be done for women's heart disease in terms of raising the awareness, understanding, and mortality levels achieved by higher-profile illnesses such as breast cancer. She has every intention of succeeding. "I really do not want women's heart disease to go the way of the flavor of the month club," she says. "It is the leading killer of women, so I don't think there's any amount of research, education, or care that would be too much." ■

For more information, please visit www.cedars-sinai.edu/womensheart. To make a donation please use the enclosed envelope and be sure to write "Women's Heart Fund" on the Special Fund line.

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