

The Major Catalyst

Barbra Streisand

# The Gift is in the GIVING

BY ELIZABETH VITANZA

When Barbra Streisand sets out to do something, she does not hold back. Her 50 gold, 30 platinum, and 18 multi-platinum albums set records for female singers. Her film debut, *Funny Girl*, won the 1968 Academy Award® for Best Actress. It is her newest endeavor, however—the Barbra Streisand Women’s Cardiovascular Research and Education Program at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center—that makes her particularly proud these days.

“Women need to be educated about female cardiovascular disease, and the medical community must be propelled toward change,” says Ms. Streisand, who has contributed to women’s health programs through the Streisand Foundation since 1986.

On a warm and breezy summer afternoon, Barbra Streisand is standing at a podium on a patio outside of Cedars-Sinai’s research building to talk about her involvement with the Women’s Heart Center. A reserved, self-effacing woman off the stage, Ms. Streisand usually shies away from the spotlight and public attention. But she becomes clearly animated and emotional when talking about the disease that took her father’s life.

“For decades women have been treated based on medical research done on men,” she says. “I find that staggeringly offensive. That seems almost silly and ridiculous! It’s hard to believe that has been true, but so many things are hard to believe these days,” she adds with a smile.

An avid reader of science and medical articles, Ms. Streisand confesses that she was “absolutely shocked” when she first saw the statistics. Heart disease is, in fact, a leading killer of women in the

United States. It takes the lives of 500,000 women per year—more than all cancers combined. Not only does heart disease kill more women than men, but 40

percent of women do not survive their first heart attack. “Just like with breast cancer,” she says, “the impetus to improve the situation must come from women themselves.”

In a serendipitous intersection of philanthropy and medicine, a leading cardiologist, Bernadine Healy, MD, first described the chronic lack of understanding of women’s heart disease with the help of one of Ms. Streisand’s most popular films. In a 1991 editorial in *The New England Journal of Medicine* titled “The Yentl Syndrome,” Dr. Healy referenced Streisand’s movie, based on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story, in which the heroine has to disguise herself as a man to attend school and study the Talmud at an all-male Jewish school in 19th century Poland. Dr. Healy effectively showed that in order for a woman to be treated like a man, her symptoms must look like those of a man to a doctor. It was a watershed moment for women and cardiology, but Dr. Healy’s call to action is just now being answered by increased gender-based research and education.

It was at Ms. Streisand’s request that the Barbra Streisand Foundation began to research possible funding opportunities in the field of women’s health. At the same time the Foundation, long a supporter of civil liberties



## ***“Women need to be educated about female cardiovascular disease, and the medical community must be propelled toward change.”***

—BARBRA STREISAND

and human rights, was looking to make a significant contribution to the city of Los Angeles. The Foundation’s longtime executive director, Marge Tabankin, describes their decision to elect Cedars-Sinai as “an amazing confluence of events.” A close friend of Streisand’s had mentioned the Women’s Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai, says Tabankin. “So we looked into it,” she recalls. “We read through articles, speeches, and published research, and saw what an incredible reputation the Cedars-Sinai Women’s Heart Center has and the leading role Dr. Bairey Merz, its director, plays in the field of cardiology.”

Tabankin recalls how thrilled she and Streisand were when they realized that by giving to Cedars-Sinai, they could focus their philanthropic attention on both women’s health and supporting the Los Angeles community. “The zeitgeist was just right, I guess!” she adds with a laugh. “It seemed like a perfect fit, and it was right around the corner!”

Tabankin still marvels at her colleague’s commitment to the causes she supports. “I have no discretionary fund,” says Tabankin. “Barbra makes every single philanthropic decision for the Foundation—from a \$250 library replacement for defaced books to the Cedars-Sinai gift. My role is to bring her the information and consider whether or not the proposal meets our interests from a policy level and value-added perspective.” The major question that Tabankin and Streisand ask themselves when considering their support is, “could this happen without the Foundation’s help?” In the case of the Women’s Heart Center, the answer was clear.

Although the Barbra Streisand Foundation usually makes anonymous gifts, Ms. Streisand knew that her name could raise the issue to the level of awareness it needed. According to Tabankin, it is one of only a few times in the 22 years of the Foundation’s existence that the gift was made public. Streisand explains, “For me, the gift is in the giving, not the recognition. But I felt such a need for people to learn about the situation that I lent my name to it as a way to catch people’s attention.” She knows her audience well, and wants them to know about heart disease. “The fact is that someone

who might never read the science pages of *The New York Times* would maybe stop to read an article with my name in the headline,” she says matter-of-factly.

According to Eduardo Marbán, MD, PhD, director at the Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute, the new program could not come at a better time. “The medical system has failed to recognize female-pattern heart attack symptoms; current testing and treatments are both geared toward male physiology.” Because of its focus on both patients’ and doctors’ perspectives, the Streisand Program will tackle the issue from both sides.

“We’re on the cusp of understanding the uniqueness, in terms of gender, in the way symptoms of heart disease present themselves,” says Ms. Streisand. “Women must learn to recognize signs and symptoms of the disease; physicians should also receive specialized training to diagnose these women and devise better treatments.”

If Barbra Streisand had chosen a different career, she might very well have turned out like C. Noel Bairey Merz, MD. The director of the Women’s Heart Center is a tireless and passionate advocate for women and a world-class cardiologist. Dr. Bairey Merz sees the Barbra Streisand Women’s Cardiovascular Research and Education Program as a vital addition to the ever-expanding scientific and therapeutic arsenal against women’s heart disease.

“We need these kinds of endowments, this type of leadership,” says Dr. Bairey Merz. “We do this important work, we talk about awareness, we talk about how women die every day of heart disease, in part because we never studied women.”

“Back in the 1950s,” she explains, “the Framingham Heart Study got it right: They started by studying women and men; but somewhere in the 1960s and ’70s we got it wrong, and we stopped studying women. Women every day now pay the price of the medical and scientific community not knowing about important sex and gender differences in heart disease.”



Barbra Streisand and Dr. C. Noel Bairey Merz, director of the Cedars-Sinai Women's Heart Center, at the dedication event for the Barbra Streisand Women's Cardiovascular Research and Education Program.

"We have National Institutes of Health grants; we have American Heart Association grants; we have a fantastic Medical Center where we can do this important and cutting-edge work; we have talented coinvestigators, the Women's Heart Center staff—we can't do much if we don't have all the resources that we need. And thanks to the Streisand Foundation, we now have this invaluable Program."

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Bairey Merz was asked by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute to start the women's ischemia syndrome evaluation (WISE). This was the first large study of women undergoing coronary angiography, and this was the study to "crack" the *Yentl* syndrome, so to speak, and to really try to understand why women had to look like a man to get the right kind of treatment and not die from a heart attack.

Since then, the WISE study has generated some valuable data. "One of the key facts this study brought to light," explains Dr. Bairey Merz, "is that women preferentially in their middle years will develop a disease called microvascular coronary syndrome, and instead of developing the big lumpy, bumpy, fatty plaque that men develop, women are instead more likely to streamline it into the wall of the artery, making it invisible to the traditional angiogram."

A very loose, crude way to think about it is to look at how men and women gain weight. Men tend to gain weight in their abdomen. The fat is localized in one area—the rest of their body looks pretty thin. Women tend to gain weight all over. And those weight-gain differences are really differences in how men and women deposit fat. Well, it looks like the same thing happens in our arteries.

These gender differences are only one of many observations that the WISE study brought to light. "We now have a lot of work to do because we have to move

forward and start to design new treatments," says Dr. Bairey Merz. "This is why this Program is critically important."

Dr. Bairey Merz is optimistic about what the gift will accomplish down the road. "This is funding for the dissemination of education, research, and testing—not just for the immediate future, but for generations to come." Streisand couldn't agree more: "I know the work done by Noel and her colleagues at the Women's Heart Center will help save lives and serve countless women."

**W**omen like Lori Kupetz, for instance. Three years ago, when she was 38 years old, Kupetz experienced what she thought was heart disease. "I was hiking with a friend and I got blinding chest pain: it stopped me in my tracks," she explains. Her physician told her she was "barking up the wrong tree" asking to see a cardiologist, so Kupetz spent a year going to a variety of specialists. "The last doctor I saw suggested that I go on antidepressants as pain management," she remembers. When she found Dr. Bairey Merz, Kupetz was on her last attempt to find an answer. Within days, Kupetz was diagnosed and underwent an emergency bypass to save her life. Today, she is adamant about recognizing the role the Women's Heart Center played in her survival. "Countless people have said to me, 'You are so lucky!'" She stops, her voice breaks with emotion recalling that difficult year. "This has nothing to do with luck. I was persistent, and I kept searching to find the medical care I needed. I found it here with [Dr. Bairey Merz], and the Women's Heart Center. Their groundbreaking research, and education, and prevention is what can save lives."

The artist is never too far away from Barbra Streisand, the activist. Leaving the language of science for a brief moment, she describes her devotion to this cause in lyrical terms: "The Women's Heart Center..." she ponders. "The heart truly is the center. Emotionally, culturally, psychologically, and physically." And she adds: "It's a gift worth giving." ■