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The Mayor Went Vegan, Then Spread the Word

By ROBYN ROSS JAN. 25, 2014

The side of Vicki VanDeCarr's tote bag reads, "Only kale can save us now."

In Marshall, a growing number of residents believe that slogan is not far from the truth. Barbecue and chicken-fried steak are a way of life in this corner of East Texas; so are obesity, diabetes, cancer and heart disease. But because of the mayor, Marshall is becoming known as a stop on the national vegan speaking circuit and a small city where people who eschew animal products can order in restaurants.

Ms. VanDeCarr, 52, came to Marshall from nearby Beckville last weekend for the New Year, New You Health Fest, which promotes a vegan diet. In its third year, the event attracted more than 400 people from 17 states and three countries. The agenda included exercise classes, cooking demonstrations and lectures by vegan celebrities like the runner Scott Jurek and the cooking instructor and author Colleen Patrick-Goudreau.

One day last year, Ms. VanDeCarr's Zumba instructor invited her for vegan snacks after class and sent her home with a copy of the 2011 film documentary "Forks Over Knives."

"Before, I thought going vegan was like eating cardboard and hugging a tree," Ms. VanDeCarr said. "After eating some of her food, I was like, 'Man, it tastes really good.'" She watched the documentary, which helped convince her that a plant-based diet could help her avoid some of the health problems plaguing other members of her family. Since then, Ms. VanDeCarr has helped her daughter, son-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, father-in-law and four grandchildren convert to what she calls a plant-based, whole foods diet. Although the diet promoted in Marshall excludes animal products, most refer to it that way, avoiding the term vegan. "Vegan" calls to mind what you cannot eat, while "plant-based, whole foods" emphasizes what you can, said Shannon Johnson, the Zumba instructor who converted Ms. VanDeCarr.

Ms. VanDeCarr now brings lasagna made with meat-substitute soy crumbles to her church dinners. Her conversion is not an anomaly. Many area residents attending the festival spoke of adopting a plant-based diet, dropping pounds and reversing chronic health conditions. The Facebook group for Get Healthy Marshall, the movement's umbrella organization, has about 600 members.

Get Healthy Marshall was started by the five-term mayor, Ed Smith, and his wife, Amanda, who directs the nonprofit group. When Mr. Smith received a diagnosis of prostate cancer in 2008, he decided to treat it with aggressive dietary changes under a doctor's supervision. He began eating only whole grains, nuts, fruits, vegetables and legumes. Scans later showed that the cancerous growth had disappeared.

"Many people are using that approach and getting great results," said Dr. Neal Barnard, president of Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a preventive-medicine group that advocates a vegan diet.

The Smiths thought that lifestyle could benefit others. In 2011 the couple held

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firefighters, and the other was
of 200 people, the Smiths

decided to underwrite an annual festival.

Reggie Cooper, the assistant fire chief, who attended the program for firefighters, said he had struggled to manage his diabetes with medication and what he considered a healthy diet: baked fish and chicken, fewer fried foods. After the program, Mr. Cooper and two other emergency responders switched to a plant-based diet for 28 days: enough time, Mr. Cooper said, for him to "detox" and change his palate. He has since lost 50 pounds and stopped diabetes medications.

"Ed and Amanda found a pot of gold," Mr. Cooper said of plant-based eating. "They didn't just sit on that. They brought that pot of gold to others."

Through Get Healthy Marshall, Ms. Smith has organized monthly plant-based potlucks, which typically attract 30 to 40 people. The group also offers healthy-eating tours of a local supermarket, which stocks vegan staples like quinoa, an egg substitute for baking and half a dozen kinds of almond milk. The popularity of plant-based eating has also influenced at least six local restaurants to add vegan dishes to their menus. These restaurants are highlighted on gethealthymarshall.com.

Mr. Smith describes the vegan movement as a spectrum with animal rights on one end and health on the other. He said a few people had criticized him for not emphasizing the animal-rights aspect. That's not the appropriate tactic for East Texas, he said. Mr. Smith himself comes from a cattle-ranching family and spent his summers as a teenager working on the ranch.

"People are much more receptive to the health" message, he said. "We've seen people make the change for health purposes, and once they've been able to disassociate themselves from animal products, all of a sudden they're more receptive to what's happening with animals. It's not such a challenge to their own personal ethics."

Education works better than legislation, said Brad Smith, a Forest Service firefighter from nearby Longview. Mr. Smith, who is not related to the mayor, adopted a plant-based diet after attending his first New Year, New You two years ago.

"It's an inviting approach versus a regulatory approach," he said of the mayor's initiative. "People push back when you tell them what to do, especially in Texas, but when it's their choice it may be more long lasting."

Robyn Ross is a journalist in Austin.

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