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### Showcasing a Hero in Cardiology Care: Dr. Heval Kelli

Dr. Sorrentino:

Welcome to a special edition of Heart Matters on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Matthew Sorrentino, and joining me to share his inspiring story and dedication to the field of cardiology is Dr. Heval Kelli, a cardiologist who specializes in general non-invasive cardiology and preventive cardiology at Northside Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Kelli was recently nominated for ReachMD's Heroes in Healthcare Initiative, honoring those recognized by their peers for outstanding contributions to medical care. Dr. Kelli, welcome to the program and congratulations on this nomination.

Dr. Kelli:

Oh, thank you very much. It's an honor to be here.

Dr. Sorrentino:

To start us off, Dr. Kelli, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became interested in the field of cardiology?

Dr. Kelli:

Yes, I'm a Kurdish person from Syria, and we lived there until I was age of 11 and because of political environment, we had to flee Syria and live as refugees in refugee camps in Germany for 6 years. And 2 weeks after 9/11, we got the opportunity to come to the U.S. and resettle in Clarkston, Georgia, a small city outside of Atlanta. And that was around when I was 18 years old. I lived in one of the poorest communities in the area and I never forget, the only reason the ambulance really came to our apartment complex was either because someone got injured from a crime activity or if someone had a heart attack. My father had a heart attack within a few weeks of being in this country, so that stuck with me as something I wanted to do to help my community and make a difference and so I end up going to Georgia State University, Morehouse School of Medicine, where I learned how to serve the underserved, and eventually I got my internal medicine and cardiology training at Emory, where I was exposed to the pathways and methods to implement preventive cardiology in those community. And now, I serve the same community I grew up, when I came to the U.S.

Dr. Sorrentino:

Well, certainly, I can understand seeing healthcare around your community and how that influenced you. You mentioned that your father had a heart attack, did cardiology issues in your family make you think of cardiology as a specialty?

Dr. Kelli:

That and in the community, in general, like, a lot of the immigrants and refugees, I noticed develop heart disease much earlier than their native citizens and I'm not sure is because of the stress and experience they have in their lifetime or of the genetic makeup, but there's lack of prevention in our community. I can tell you, like, in Syria, people go to the doctor when they're sick, they don't go to the doctor to check their cholesterol and blood pressure and make sure everything is OK. So, that's something that I noticed that early on in my community and just being surrounded by so much heart disease motivated me to pursue this career.

Dr. Sorrentino:

I'd like to share some comments that led to your nomination for this Heroes in Healthcare Initiative. Here's a short snippet from what one of your peers had to say about you: "Heval began working as a dishwasher at a Mediterranean restaurant, balancing a 40 hour work week with his full-time school schedule. He made a deal with himself that for every dish he washed, he would read one page. Using this method, he quickly learned English, finishing high school and got accepted to Georgia State University, all within 10 months of coming to America as a refugee from Syria. Ten years later, he started his internal medicine residency at Emory University, one block from the restaurant where he washed dishes. In 2020, he graduated from the Cardiology Fellowship and is working in the same area that welcomed his family as refugees." Dr. Kelli, when I hear those words, it's clear that you've made quite an impact among your

colleagues, and I'm sure your story and experiences can serve to inspire others that have the same drive to achieve their goals. I'm curious, knowing just how far you've come, what's it like to give back to the community that you first saw when you came to America?

Dr. Kelli:

You know, I'm always very humble when someone repeats those words. I just feel like this is what America is about; this is why our country is one of the greatest in the world. I came here as a Muslim refugee at age of 18, right after 9/11 and we were welcomed by Christian church members who helped us out during the process. Held our hand through about learning English and gave us some of the opportunity to advance our life and now, I'm in a privilege position where I could actually make a difference. And that's what a motivator for me is, because why would someone at those church member and community member come and help my family when we came to the U.S.? You know, it's the least I could do to give back. There's a Kurdish saying, "Whoever taught you an alphabet, you owe them a book." I mean, I owe this country volumes; I don't think I would've made it this far if I lived somewhere else as a refugee. I think that's what makes America such a great place and unique place to grow and make sure your dreams come true.

Dr. Sorrentino:

Would there have been opportunities in Syria or the area where you grew up to be able to go into medicine, as well?

Dr. Kelli:

Well, in Syria, the problem was, as a Kurd, you know, as an oppressed minority, so you could be very smart, you could have the opportunity, but it could be taken away from you for any moment for any mistakes you make. So that's what living in a political environment is. And in Germany, in Europe, specially, you know, the opportunity for immigrants and refugees are very limited, so you could pursue it but you would be on an asylum status, which mean we couldn't go to college because we were on temporary asylum. And I think that those barriers don't exist in the United States when you come as a refugee when you arrive to this country, they give you a driver license, a social security, you get some help for three months, but you are on your own, which I think could be a challenge in the beginning, but the opportunity is wide open for you to go pursue your dreams in this country.

Dr. Sorrentino:

For those just tuning in, you're listening to Heart Matters on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Matthew Sorrentino and with me today is Dr. Heval Kelli, who's a recent nominee of ReachMD's Heroes in Healthcare Initiative. Well, getting back to your nomination, Dr. Kelli, your peer also mentioned that you started a program called the "Young Physicians Initiative"; can you tell us more about this program and what led you to start it?

Dr. Kelli:

Yes, this program is very dear to my heart because it's based on my personal experience. I grew up in Clarkston, Georgia where half of the people lived there were African American and the other half were refugees, and we all faced the same issue of being underserved and living in these poor environment. And we were not surrounded by doctors and physician and nurses and PAs or APPs, so it was very hard to find medical mentorship in that environment. Eventually, I was very lucky to go to Morehouse Medical School and Emory for my training and when I went back 10 years later to speak at my high school, I noticed that the students were facing the same challenge of finding mentorship. So, I went back and started thinking about "What is the best way to inspire these kids?" so I thought about, instead of bringing them out of their environment to our hospital, let's bring the medical students and physicians to their classroom. So, we started this model, the Young Physician Initiative, which focus, actually on being present in a classroom and doing fun activity to inspire these students and connect them to our field. And I started with one medical student doing these various sessions during the year and eventually, we expanded to 4 high school and 6 colleges in Atlanta and now we have a very large virtual program during COVID-19, so it was based on the simple idea of being present and connecting underserved student with a medical mentor.

Dr. Sorrentino:

So, besides just going to the different high schools, are there any other services that the Young Physicians Initiative offers to these young students in these underserved communities?

Dr. Kelli:

Yes. So eventually each school will have a team of medical students, physicians that works with these students by guiding them through the high school process and also in college, too, where they offer personal statement editing, help them with studying for the MCATs and different exams, but at the same time offering , shadowing experiences where they go and work with physician. But most importantly, every year we have an annual conference called "Doctor for a Day" where we bring over 50physicians together into a conference with all the high school students and college students invited where they can meet and learn about different aspect of medicine. So, that's a lot of the service we provide. Now, with COVID-19, we have a very robust virtual program. We actually divided students to be called a mentorship circle, in which each circle has 2 medical student or physician and they guide them through the process throughout the year, 'cause that's really the challenge of COVID-19, it's kind of hurt a lot of the people from poor communities

'cause there's no further shadowing and access, so we trying to use a virtual model to keep everyone connected during these tough times.

Dr. Sorrentino:

Well, this certainly sounds like a program that would have huge applicability to other areas. I know here on the south side of Chicago, where I'm located, we have a very similar population to what you're serving around the Atlanta area. If any of our listeners want to learn more about the Young Physicians Initiative and put together a similar type program in their area, where can they go to get more information about this program?

Dr. Kelli:

Yes, YPIprogram.com is our website. Our model is very scalable, it's very low-cost and very low effort. We focus very much on high impact, low effort because one thing we learned is as physicians and medical students, we are very busy, so finding a way to engage everyone in the process is the best way to continue and sustain a program like this. We call it like a residency program, where actually, the med students do a lot of the heavy work and the resident physician are there more for guidance. So, it's actually a great opportunity for medical students to find leadership skills and opportunity and also is great for physician to be engaged in the community in a very low-effort type of way.

Dr. Sorrentino:

I'm sure there are a lot of obstacles facing many of the young students in the underserved communities. If there was one message you can give to some of those young students on how to overcome some of these obstacles, what would you tell them to try to do?

Dr. Kelli:

Honestly, the best advice that I got in the United States was from a lawyer, and when I came to this country, he said, "If you don't ask, the answer's always 'no'." So, I encourage a lot of people who have a dream to ask people if they could help them in any way and show dedication and motivation, and that's what I did all my life. And if I met someone, I ask them for advice or an opportunity and they offer me a signal or some kind of advice, I would take advantage of that and work very hard. I think we forget that intelligence is important in medicine, but I think hard work and dedication is your best trait to be successful.

Dr. Sorrentino:

I know a lot of our medical students and young residents want to give back to their communities, as well. Do you have any advice for our students and our residents how they can get involved in doing work like this and giving back to the communities where they work?

Dr. Kelli:

I think the key is to build a team in every institution, residency, or a medical school; there's always people who want to do this type of work and I think a team could start very small with few people and have a focus, maybe start with one high school or one college, you know, email the advisor there, tell them what you want to do, and focus on sustainability. I tell people when you are present in the classroom talking about a case of heart attack or heart failure and showing the kids how we diagnose it and getting them engaged, it really does make a difference because they really feel inspired; at the same time, you go back home and feel very rewarded. And I think one of the things that we could attack burnout in medicine by engaging more people in meaningful activity like volunteering in our community and inspiring the next generation of doctors.

Dr. Sorrentino:

Well, with that inspiring message in mind, I want to thank you, Dr. Kelli, not only for taking the time to share your story with me today, but for helping young students really find their dream as you found your dream, as well. It was really great having you on the program today.

Dr. Kelli:

No, thank you, very much. I've been listening to ReachMD since I was a pre-med student, so I feel very honored to be on your program.

Dr. Sorrentino:

That's great. Thanks so much. I'm Dr. Matthew Sorrentino, and to access this and other episodes in our series, visit [ReachMD.com/programs/HeartMatters](https://ReachMD.com/programs/HeartMatters) where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. And thanks for listening.