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**Quick, Gimme Chocolate, My Mother-in-Law's Coming for Thanksgiving**

by Euna Kwon Brossman



*Carol L Rickard*

Carol Rickard’s first personal experience with emotional eating didn’t have anything to do with food, but with alcohol. She was a young girl when she overheard something that she wasn’t supposed to. She found out that her father was dying of cancer. “I started stealing alcohol from my parents, and it became my survival tool,” she confesses. She says access was easy because her family owned a lodge at California’s Bass Lake that had a restaurant and a stocked bar. “Alcohol became my way to cope, but once I went to high school, I got into basketball and that replaced alcohol as my survival tool and became my life tool.”

Rickard understands all too well the emotional power food can have, which is why she has made a career out of helping people figure out how to stop using food to cope. She is a behavioral specialist and licensed social worker who works in the Milestones Partial Hospital Program located on the same property as the Capital Health Regional Medical Center in Trenton. Milestones gives patients tools to manage life instead of allowing life to manage them and is part of the hospital property right next door.

Rickard is the author of several books on the subject of emotional eating and the founder of the health education company, Well YOUiversity, LLC, to serve those struggling with chronic health issues and reduce the personal and financial costs associated with them.

Rickard is also one of the featured speakers for the eighth annual Wellness Day organized by Heart to Hearts, a women’s wellness group based in Hamilton. The event will be held at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton on Saturday, November 12, from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. For more information visit [www.hearttohearts.org](http://www.hearttohearts.org).

Heart to Hearts, which is dedicated to providing quality health education to women and their families, has lined up Christina Pirello as the keynote speaker. Pirello is one of America’s preeminent authorities on natural and whole foods, the author of five cookbooks, and the Emmy Award-winning host of the television series “Christina Cooks!” Her talk is titled, “Health Is Not the Luck of the Draw: You Just Have to Know What to Eat.”

The event also features several area physicians and health care professionals who share their expertise. This year’s presenters include Annie Condit, a bilingual registered dietician with Princeton HealthCare System, who uses her passions for gardening, cooking, and exercising to partner with various community and corporations in developing and delivering family-based nutrition, cooking, and exercise programs. She will speak on the benefits of a plant-based diet.

Ansu Joy, an endocrinologist will present “Reducing Your Risks for Diabetes,” and Sherryl K. Croitor, a cardiologist, will talk about women’s cardiovascular health and how to be stay heart-healthy in your 30s, 40s,

50s, and beyond. Both physicians are affiliated with Princeton HealthCare System.

Kate Thomsen, who is board certified in integrative and holistic medicine and practices in the Pennington area, was an environmentalist, teacher, and chemist prior to entering medical school. She will speak on “The Alkaline Way — Your Journey to Health.”

Charlene M. Henry is a fitness specialist at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia and has developed a Better Backs class for Heart to Hearts, for clients with a variety of orthopedic and medical issues. Also a personal trainer in Malvern, Pennsylvania, she will speak on “Better Backs.”

The Heart to Hearts event also offers participants Reiki and reflexology sessions, chair massages, health screenings by professionals from Princeton HealthCare System, information on diabetes, cancer, osteoporosis, hypertension, cholesterol and heart health; door prizes; and basket raffles.

In addition, 30 exhibitors will demonstrate health and wellness products and services and offer information of interest to women and their families. Research has shown that women are the primary drivers of health care decisions for their families, so the conference is a targeted approach aimed at educating women about all aspects of family health.

Rickard says she is excited to be a participant, especially given the timing of the conference, with the holidays just around the corner. She still has vivid memories of her father, which include happy memories around food, so she understands the emotional connection between food and good times. She says that is why there is such a strong correlation between overeating and the holidays, which includes family time, both bad and good.

“There are two things my father would always want when he came home from work,” says Rickard. “He loved New York sharp cheddar cheese, and he also loved peanuts, so we always had them around. To this very day, if I see that cheese, it takes me back to that time when he would come home, right before dinner, and we would have cheese on crackers and a handful of peanuts. It was a pre-dinner snack, and we would always have it in moderation, but I associate those foods with happy times with my father.”

Holidays in the Rickard household were generally grand. Rickard says that her father’s sister, her aunt, was married to Ray Bolger, the actor who was the scarecrow in the “Wizard of Oz.” And so they would rotate houses, with different families taking turns hosting the holidays. “When it was Uncle Ray’s turn we would meet at the Bel Air Country Club. The food was always amazing, just amazing,” she says. “The ham, the turkey, mashed potatoes, desserts, all the delicious starches. My parents had a ‘Yours, Mine, and Ours’ kind of family (the 1968 movie starring Henry Fonda and Lucille Ball about a huge combined family — like the Brady Bunch and then some). My mother had three children, my father had four, and then together they had me and my brother. Holidays meant our big family getting together — 25, 30 people depending on how many of my brothers and sisters were around.”

Rickard’s father, a doctor who specialized in treating arthritis, lost his battle with cancer when she was 14 years old. But she stayed on track with basketball, winning a scholarship to play at Missouri Western State College. She stayed there for a year and ultimately graduated from Kansas State University in 1985 with a B.S. in leisure studies, which is the study of using recreational activities in a therapy setting.

Rickard reveals that her own journey with emotional eating hit a new direction once she stopped playing basketball in college. “I found food once again in the form of sweets, especially chocolate. I used to have a joke that you could determine how stressful my day was by the size of the chocolate bar I bought at the store.” She says it was probably two years after graduation that she started working in a health club and made sure that she worked hard to exercise off what she ate.

She moved to New Jersey in 1987 to follow her mother who had moved here for major bypass surgery, and worked as a recreation therapist for 14 years, living in Vineland and then Cherry Hill. Rickard moved to central New Jersey in 2000 and got her master’s in social work that same year from Rutgers University. She now lives in Hopewell with her family of two dogs, a six-year-old golden retriever named Kalley and a Rottweiler mix, a rescue, named Bud.

Rickard acknowledges it is natural to associate food with happy times because we use food to celebrate. It connects us to happy memories and loved ones, so we have been taught to connect food and emotions. “That’s important for people to honor and validate,” says Rickard. “Maybe you are pulled toward that food because you want to think about your grandmother who used to make it for you. The problem becomes when we are no longer in control of our behavior, and food becomes an automatic response not just for positive emotions but more negative emotions as well. You have to find a way to balance those feelings.”

Her two decades of working in hospital-based programs have given Rickard a realization that most people have survival tools they grab throughout their lives to deal with the hurdles, and eating is one of those. “You look at people like Oprah Winfrey who have survived many stressful events and yet been successful, but then have issues around food that make weight management a constant part of their lives. But food is not the right tool for the job. It’s like using a knife for a job when you need a screwdriver. It kind of works but not very well.”

While people can use food to deal with stress and the emotions that go along with stress, it can provide some temporary relief, Rickard says, but then it goes on to create a whole lot of medical problems including obesity and health issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.

Rickard applauds First Lady Michelle Obama for taking on the issue of childhood obesity but says that her approach, which focuses on diet and exercise, is missing a crucial element. “Unless you look at the emotions behind eating and examine more closely why people eat, you will be missing the boat,” says Rickard. She says that she wrote to Michelle Obama a couple of weeks ago expressing her concerns and is awaiting a response.

“The holidays are the perfect storm for emotional eating,” says Rickard. “Look at the stress around the holidays combined with the access to food. And the two together can feed off one another very well. Food becomes the tool to deal with stress. You can see it in people who try to stop smoking. What do they replace those cigarettes with? Very often, it’s food.”

Rickard says the first thing she tries to teach her patients is to be aware of emotional eating. “You keep falling into the same hole if you don’t see that it’s there,” she says. “I teach people that stress is like laundry. You can hide it and try to ignore it, but that doesn’t stop it from piling up.”

So what can you do to keep the stress laundry at bay? Here are some of her suggestions:

Do a load of 'stress laundry' once a day. "For some people, it may be passive activities like listening to music, reading a book, or doing breathing exercises. Maybe it's writing and journaling. Especially effective is doing something active, like taking a walk, exercise, or even cleaning the house, though for some, that can actually be stressful. Try a combination. It's a very individual thing," says Rickard.

If you are going to people's houses for parties be aware of the dangers ahead and plan. Rickard recommends that you drink water before you go to the party or have a snack. Use smaller plates to eat less. Do not put more than two items on a plate at a time to prevent yourself from eating too much and too fast.

Have an escape plan. If you're at a dinner function with family or people from work, and you're aware that your emotions are building, then it may be a good time to pull somebody off to a corner and have a conversation. Leave a family function a little early. Make your appearance and then limit your exposure.

Rickard says that the stress response makes some people crave sugar or salt and it's different in different people. "My favorite stress food is pretzel M&Ms; that's what I consider the perfect salt and sweet combination," she says. "Because I know that I'm vulnerable to this particular snack, I make sure I buy them in small quantities and have snack packs available. One-hundred-calorie packs for things like cookies are great as long as you can exercise control and eat just one."

Rickard continues to explore new and different ways to help people with their lives. Her goal is to coach and provide businesses with employee wellness programs. A major revelation came three years ago when Capital Health asked her to do a community education course for them built around eating and nutrition for their women's series. "They knew that I approached it from the behavior standpoint. It was a one-night workshop for women and I called it 'Using Food to Cope.'" Attendance at the women's series had been averaging eight to ten women. "That night, 36 women showed up. We were bursting at the seams, and it was clear that the program really resonated with the women. For me, it was a sign of how many women could identify with using food as one of their ways of coping with life."

Rickard has been working with Joan Brame, who owns and runs Empower Fitness for Women in Lawrenceville and wanted to offer educational programs for members. "She invited me to do a workshop and the feedback was that a lot of women there were looking for the tools. If you're going to give up the food, you have to put something in its place. It's all about finding the release that works for you."

A visually driven person, Rickard brings up the image of taking a bottle of soda and shaking it up when talking about finding that release. "The pressure builds up on the inside but it doesn't go anywhere," she says.

"People are like that. They use food to cover up their emotions. The real strategy is finding ways that work for you and are effective. If you open up a seltzer bottle that you've shaken, it will explode. But if you let the air out a little bit at a time, slowly and patiently, it decreases pressure, and you don't lose it. Our emotions can build up in the same way, and if you try to keep them all bottled up inside, they will go over your nose and when you open your mouth, they will spill out. So take action and do something active or something meaningful to decrease your level of stress."

Women's Wellness Day, Heart to Heart, Inc., ETS, Carter and Rosedale roads, Princeton. Saturday, November

12, 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Health screenings, reiki and reflexology sessions, chair massages, talks about diabetes, heart health, emotional eating, a plant based diet, back care, and more. "Health Is Not the Luck of the Draw: You Just Have to Know What to Eat" presented by Christina Pirello, host of the television series "Christina Cooks!" \$50 for Heart to Hearts members and seniors 65 and above; \$60 for the general public. Includes breakfast and lunch buffets. 609-689-3131 or [www.hearttohearts.org](http://www.hearttohearts.org).