



Mary Ida Vandross, mother of the late Luther Vandross, finds comfort and strength in her son's fans.

ILLNESS
IS A
Family Affair

By Meta McMillian



On hand to welcome Hazella Rollins-Lavar, executive director of the Stroke of Hope Foundation in New York (seated, in purple) and Mrs. Mary Ida Vandross to the "Salute to Luther" program were (back row, from left): Sue Cotey, R.N., CDE; Leann Olansky, M.D., medical director; Melissa Matteo, R.D.; and Chyrsa Kirsch, R.N., CDE, of the Huron Hospital Lennon Diabetes Center.

Mother of Luther Vandross gives message at Huron Hospital salute

As far as she knew, her son, the late R&B singer Luther Vandross, was doing relatively well. She knew, of course, as many of his fans knew, that he battled weight problems. His weight losses and gains, however, never diminished his ability to captivate audiences with those soulful, classic ballads.

Mary Ida Vandross says the magnitude of her son's health problems became painfully clear in April 2003 when Luther suffered a massive

stroke at his Manhattan residence. Stroke is one of the potential consequences of diabetes. She says she then learned that he had been diagnosed with diabetes, but hadn't told her. He had sought to control it through weight loss. Luther died at age 54 in July 2005.

"When Luther passed, it was devastating," says Mrs. Vandross, 83, of Philadelphia.

She says she ultimately may not have been able to prevent her son's death, but believes that if she had known early on that he had diabetes she might have been able to help him live longer. "It really hurts that I never knew Luther had diabetes," Mrs. Vandross says. "If I had known he had it, and then learned more about it, I might have been able to help."

Mrs. Vandross is now on a mission. She won't be silenced by the pain she has suffered from the loss of Luther, the last surviving member of her immediate family, and other family members prior to him. Those family members include her husband, also named Luther, two other children and a grandson—all of whom succumbed to diabetes or its complications or consequences. A third child died from complications of asthma.

Heartbreak Into Crusade

Mrs. Vandross is on tour, in conjunction with the New York-based Stroke of Hope Foundation, to encourage others to get tested for such diseases as diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, high cholesterol and heart disease. She also wants to heighten

awareness of conditions like stress and obesity, which can contribute to these chronic diseases. She says she especially is concerned about alerting African-Americans, who disproportionately are affected by many of these preventable or manageable illnesses.

She appeared at the East Cleveland Library last fall to address a group attending a diabetes awareness and prevention program, called a "Salute to Luther," sponsored by Huron Hospital. In addition to remarks from Mrs. Vandross, the program was a celebration of Luther, a Grammy Award-winning artist, through performances of his works by the local Spirit Plus Show Band. Some of Luther's hits include "Dance with My Father," "Here and Now," "Never Too Much" and "A House Is Not a Home."

During the "Salute," Mrs. Vandross' voice often faltered and she could not hold back her tears as she recounted the losses she has suffered. Her message to listeners involves "testing" and "family involvement." She says that in addition to being tested, individuals who learn they have a disease or serious lifestyle problems should share the news with family members. >

She says her family members apparently wanted to protect her by not revealing their illnesses, or their severity, to her. But she says neither she nor other family members should be protected from knowledge of a loved one's battle against a disease, especially if that disease is manageable.

"There is no cure for diabetes, but it can be controlled," says Mrs. Vandross, who does not have diabetes, but is on dialysis due to kidney failure and has suffered other illnesses. "I didn't need to be protected. Families should come

pioneering efforts at Huron Hospital to address chronic illnesses like diabetes. Huron Hospital, a Cleveland Clinic hospital, is the home of the internationally known Comprehensive Diabetes Self-Management Program, located at the hospital's Lennon Diabetes Center.

Huron Hospital has worked strategically over the last three years to improve the health of patients with diabetes, and is now a leading hospital for diabetes care. Through the self-management program, diabetes patients learn about the disease and how to manage it. They learn about foods they can substitute for the high-calorie, high-fat foods that increase blood sugar levels and weight. They also learn to monitor their blood sugar level. The patients also meet in support groups to share personal progress stories and to learn about new strategies to manage the disease.

Gus Kious, M.D., president of Huron Hospital, called diabetes "a scourge in our community" during the "Salute." He says the hospital's strategies to help residents prevent or control diabetes and other chronic diseases include education and providing the highest-quality care. "We are working to create better outcomes for our patients. We believe we can make a difference."

In partnership with Cleveland Clinic, the hospital also has created the Center for Minority Health. The goal for the center is to reduce healthcare disparities among patients from different cultural, racial or socioeconomic backgrounds, Dr. Kious says.

Defeating Diabetes

For information about Huron Hospital's Comprehensive Diabetes Self-Management Program, call Medline at (440) 312-4533.

Hear for Yourself ▼



To listen to a part of Mary Ida Vandross' personal testimony given at the "Salute to Luther Vandross Event," go to huronhospital.org. Click on "Salute to Luther Vandross."

Diabetes is a chronic disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin, which is needed to convert food products into energy. An estimated 20.8 million children and adults, about 7 percent of the national population, have diabetes, according to the American Diabetes Association (ADA).

But about 6.2 million of these Americans don't know they have it, according to the ADA. Left untreated, the disease can lead to blindness, amputations, or kidney, nerve or heart disease. Obesity and lack of exercise are considered contributing factors to diabetes.

Strengthened by Fans

Because Luther was the last of Mrs. Vandross' immediate family members to die, the two had maintained an especially close bond in the year prior to his passing. His loss has been crushing. But she has turned her loss and pain into a wake-up call for others. She implores her listeners to get tested and help each other as families to fight chronic illnesses.

She says prayer and Luther's fans have helped her cope with his loss and the loss of her other family members. The fans send her cards, letters and other correspondence to show their love and support. They help spur her on in her crusade. "Luther had such an impact on the world," Mrs. Vandross says. "His fans are so kind. Their love and concern keep me from always being in mourning." ■



Charles Modlin, M.D., director, Huron Hospital Center for Minority Health, Cleveland Clinic Glickman Urology Institute's Minority Men's Health Center, shares a moment with Mrs. Mary Ida Vandross during her visit to promote diabetes awareness.

together at times like these to learn how they can help. Don't keep secrets from each other. We can be helpful." Family members can offer emotional support, as well as help ensure that a loved one is taking prescribed medications, eating the proper foods and getting sufficient exercise to help control a disease.

Breakthrough Diabetes Program
Mrs. Vandross applauds the