

# With Heart N Hands

## Essence Harris Banks Leads the Way to a Healthier Life

*By Anita Oubre*

**B**ringing empowerment, education, and awareness to young girls aged 10-18 and their families is the driving passion of Essence Harris Banks. However, her life's work truly took center stage when she faced a health crisis. At the time, Essence was a young mother who led a busy and active lifestyle. She enjoyed a successful career with Entergy, worked as a personal fitness trainer, and had a packed schedule filled with social events and philanthropic endeavors.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ESSENCE HARRIS BANKS

Despite appearing to be the epitome of good health, Essence began experiencing shortness of breath and heart palpitations during her workouts. Sensing that something was amiss, she trusted her instincts and promptly scheduled a visit with her doctor. However, the doctors initially dismissed her concerns, attributing her symptoms to being overworked or feeling mildly depressed. They couldn't fathom that a healthy 30-year-old woman without any significant risk factors could be at risk of heart disease.

"But there I was, only 30 years old, diagnosed with coronary artery disease and requiring three stents," Essence shared. During her recovery, she told her mother that her new journey with heart disease would become a success story. But before she could achieve that, she needed to leave the hospital and educate herself extensively about the disease and self-care.

Essence emphasizes that heart disease doesn't exclusively affect older or overweight individuals. According to the Centers for Disease Control, heart disease is the leading cause of death among African American women, with statistics indicating that one in three women will succumb to this disease. The good news, however, is that 80% of premature heart disease cases can be prevented.

This is why Essence is committed to spreading awareness about heart health. "I had over 95% blockage in two arteries. Although I didn't suffer a heart attack or a stroke, I knew something wasn't right. Fortunately, this time my cardiologist listened to me, and the condition was detected just in time," she revealed.

Heart disease was not a topic that was openly discussed in Essence's household while she was growing up. Her grandmother took charge of the family's cooking, preparing delicious meals that Essence thoroughly enjoyed. "Every meal was a feast, filled with the most flavorful foods."

That's how I ate for most of my life," Essence reminisced about her upbringing

on Tricou Street in the Lower 9th Ward. She led an active childhood, spending countless hours playing outdoors, dancing, riding bikes, and having fun. Essence remained active throughout her school years, cheerleading at St. Maurice and joining the dance team at McDonogh 35 Senior High School. As a freshman at Loyola University New Orleans, she even founded the first dance team then later moved to New York City to study dance. Running and exercise were always activities that brought her joy.

Reflecting on her past, Essence recognizes that being involved in extracurricular activities boosted her confidence as a young girl. It taught her teamwork and elevated her self-esteem. Imparting these invaluable gifts to young girls and educating them about heart health and heart disease prevention became her mission.

In 2014, Essence took matters into her own hands and realized that prevention is key to combating heart disease. Awareness and education form the foundation of this approach. This led her to establish Heart

N Hands, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating young girls in the community about heart health and heart disease prevention.

To achieve this, Heart N Hands partners with schools and organizations such as the Girl Scouts of Louisiana East and Girls on the Run, and many more. Affiliate chapters have even been established in Nashville, Houston and Atlanta. "If we can reach girls at an early age, it can positively impact their generational health habits. We empower these young girls and their



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ESSENCE HARRIS BANKS

families to make informed decisions about their health. Our goal is to raise awareness of healthy eating, a healthy lifestyle, and making good choices," Essence explained.

Heart N Hands has organized fitness and wellness sessions throughout the New Orleans area. These sessions encompass activities such as stretching, Zumba, yoga, dance and mindful meditation. Essence emphasizes the importance of physical activity, stating, "Even if you engage in movement for just 20 minutes a day, it is better than being sedentary. You don't need a gym or weights or all the equipment people typically associate with exercise. Every little activity you incorporate into your day can decrease the likelihood of developing high blood pressure or experiencing a stroke."

The organization collaborates with cardiologists and physicians who provide information about heart disease risk factors to the girls. While the sessions are educational, they are designed to be enjoyable, interactive, combining learning with fun and increased awareness.

Maintaining a balanced diet plays a crucial role in heart health. Essence advocates for moderation, understanding that it is essential to savor the soulful flavors of New Orleans cuisine while making healthy choices. "I adore potatoes, but I know I can't have them every day," Essence chuckled.

Excitingly, Essence is preparing for the fourth annual Running of the Heart 5K-10K, scheduled for September 16. Runners and walkers are all welcome to participate. The race originated during the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for people to get out of their houses, but it eventually turned into a training opportunity for Essence and her son. The inaugural race attracted 30 participants, and last fall, around 200 individuals joined the run along the bayou.

During the lockdown period, when gatherings were prohibited, the race transitioned into a virtual event with participants from around the world. Essence emphasizes that the race can be completed at

one's own pace to ensure that everyone feels comfortable. The primary objective is to promote physical activity and integrate it into one's lifestyle. Essence hopes that people will attend the event to learn more about the organization and run for their heart.

As the number of participants continues to grow, the race has found its new home on the New Orleans Lakefront, enabling teams and families to participate together. All proceeds from the event will be reinvested in programming to disseminate the message and, hopefully, alter the trajectory of this escalating disease.

Furthermore, plans are underway to launch a scholarship program for high school seniors. The organization's board eagerly awaits the submissions and is actively seeking sponsors to support these scholarships. "We want to understand how these young girls are prioritizing their health.

The criteria for the scholarships will be centered around the student as a whole, considering their academic performance, extracurricular activities, and nutritional habits," Essence explained.

Junior board members also play an integral role in the organization. Essence believes that it is crucial for youth to have a voice. "Involving young people in the process has been an invaluable learning experience for all of us," Essence reiterated.

Future plans include offering fitness classes that cater to the entire family. Essence envisions community outreach initiatives that serve a broader demographic. She is constantly brainstorming ways to create extraordinary experiences.

Providing these services to the community brings immense joy to Essence. She remains grateful for her own health and is committed to maintaining it by attending regular doctor visits, managing stress, and avoiding taking on more than she can handle.

For Essence and her family, adopting a healthy lifestyle is a priority. They exercise together and collaborate on planning nutritious meals and menus. This commitment



Essence with her sons, 22 year old Jaden and 9 year old Connor



to wellness is not new for them, as Essence has been exercising since her college days. It has become a way of life for her sons, Jaden (22) and Connor (9). They can be found at the gym or outdoors several times a week, engaging in activities like basketball and running. In fact, Essence revealed that part of her annual birthday celebration includes a family run.

"And this is the icing on the cake," Essence concluded.

More information can be found at [www.heartnhands.org](http://www.heartnhands.org) @heartnhandsnola and FB: Heart N Hands, Inc.

To sign up for the 5K/10K visit: <https://runsignup.com/signup2023>. Sign up for the newsletter at <https://www.heartnhands.org/who-we-are.html>

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ESSENCE HARRIS BANKS