

# BWE GIVES BACK

We work to change our communities and our world

## ALICIA HARRIS

### TELLS HER STORY OF SELF REFLECTION AND RUNNING FOR A CAUSE

*(As a special installment of the BWE Gives Back series, Alicia Harris gives a first-person account of why she runs in support of the American Heart Association. Alicia is a Senior Vice President at Bellwether Enterprise working in the Charlotte, NC office.)*

I grew up in a stereotypical Italian family. My dad's name is Anthony, my brother's name is Anthony and my maiden name is...Maffia. Every celebration, get-together and actually every single day growing up was all about food. Amazing food. Pastas, sauces, cured meats, the best burrata you have ever tasted, homemade cookies made with lard (sounds gross, but it's not), bread, fried eggplant, more cheese, etc.

No one ever left any meal hungry and I can assure you that you almost always consumed twice as much as you should have. The running joke in the family was that my grandparents were as wide as they were tall. We were happy though, and being a bit "plump," as my grandmother used to say, was a small price to pay. Besides, the Maffias had good genetics. All of my great grandparents had passed away at 90+ years old after consistently smoking and having a perfect 450 cholesterol count for decades.



*(From left) Alicia's husband, Jeff, and daughters, Reagan and Tatum, were in attendance to cheer on and support Alicia as she competed in the Chicago Marathon in 2016. The family returned the following year as Alicia completed the 26.2-mile race a second time.*

**“ I began to worry that my husband and I weren't doing enough to protect our own children from these potential health issues. ”**

While the generations before us didn't move much, my brother and I grew up playing outside anytime we weren't in school. Unlike my own children, we didn't have any planned activities. My mother opened our back door at 9am and told us to return by 5pm. We spent our days riding our bicycles, playing "Kick the Can," or playing some made-up game with our friends. We were always on the move. Literally.



*Tatum, 6-years-old at the time, was a motivator and morale booster for runners at the 2016 Chicago Marathon.*

By the time I got to my teens though, playing outside was not nearly as attractive as going to the mall with friends. I was trading hours on a bicycle for pizza and sodas with friends. This, coupled with five course Sunday dinners, was starting to catch up with me. I started running to help ease the effects of a Maffia lifestyle. My family didn't understand this, but they didn't discourage it either.

As an adult, I maintain many traditions from my youth and food is still a focal point for every celebration we have. I don't cook with lard, but as a former Maffia, I am not afraid to throw back some pasta, and my worst nightmare would be a guest going home hungry. With Maffia genetics on my side too, I have always been confident that my heart will tick well beyond 90. Besides genetics, I don't smoke, exercise consistently and have a shot of Sambuca every Christmas Eve after eating an 800-course meal (this promotes good luck).

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My beliefs were tested though when my grandmother chipped the armor of the perfect Maffia health record. She was diagnosed with a heart valve defect and had to undergo two open heart surgeries to replace some faulty parts of her heart. We were told that her heart problems were likely caused by genetics, but were exacerbated by high blood pressure and cholesterol. While her surgeries were extremely difficult, she recovered well and enjoyed many additional years until she passed away from a heart attack. While her valves were in good shape, she likely succumbed to a blockage that may have been the product of a sedentary lifestyle and a diet high in fat and cholesterol.

This scared me. Bad hearts? Bad cholesterol? High blood pressure? I began to worry that my husband and I weren't doing enough to protect our own children from these potential health issues. Maybe my grandmother wasn't an anomaly. We regularly kicked our kids outside to play and I cooked well-balanced, healthy meals, but what if that that wasn't enough? Who was reinforcing these things? What about our friends, their kids and our community?

Just as my fear was snowballing (which usually means I start baking cookies – counterproductive), I was introduced to the American Heart Association. I learned that beyond funding research on heart and vascular disease, Afib and cardiometabolic health, they educate people on good health practices and advocate for expanding access to heart and stroke care. They fund and facilitate programs within schools to teach children about healthy eating habits and the importance of physical activity.

And so it began...My husband and I became supporters of the American Heart Association five years ago. Their mission "to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives" is powerful, but their mechanisms for achieving that mission aligned with our philosophies. Coming from an inactive family (sorry Maffias), I wanted to raise our kids in an environment that promotes exercise, healthy eating habits and proactive, preventive care. The AHA helps people in communities learn how to do this. Yet, the AHA doesn't stop here. As not all heart issues and health problems are preventable, the AHA funds research to find solutions and advances in technology to help overcome health issues resulting from heart and stroke related conditions. The AHA has invested more than \$4.1 billion for this purpose and has helped develop many life-saving and life-changing breakthroughs. For our part, we have given our time, our energy and have personally raised almost \$300,000 to help the AHA continue their mission.

But the story doesn't end here.

Cue my 2018 bloodwork and the urgent call from my physician that went like this: "Mrs. Harris, we need you to come in tomorrow to get checked out and we need to get you on some meds immediately. We have also scheduled you to see a cardiologist next week."

My first thought of course was that I was facing imminent death and my children were going to be forced to eat jar tomato sauce for the rest of their lives (blasphemy). My second, more rational thought was I likely had enough time to teach my oldest daughter how to make sauce and, if that didn't work, one of my cousins could ship gravy from New Jersey. Whatever was going on though, I knew the AHA was going to be there to help.



Alicia and Jeff attended the Heart Ball, the AHA's largest annual fundraiser in Charlotte, on March 9, 2019. The yearly event is routinely attended by over 1,000 people and raises over \$1 million for the organization.

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I went to the cardiologist and my children will not have to suffer through Prego marinara anytime soon. However, I do have some leaky heart valves that may require repair in the years to come. I am obviously elated that I will go on to enjoy many more years of Sunday dinners, but I am grateful to the AHA. Why?

Replace and repair in the heart world are two vastly different scenarios. When my grandmother had her valve issues, she went through two massive, debilitating open heart surgeries to get better. Through the support of the AHA, new technologies have since been developed that allow the same valve problem to be corrected through a much less invasive "repair" process. Cheers to the AHA.

Maybe it's a coincidence, but I believe some paths are meant to cross. I loved the AHA before I received my fire alarm call. But now, I realize what they do goes beyond promoting good health, great care and funding research. The AHA truly changes lives and they have certainly mine.

As I mentioned, I started running several years ago to ward off the Maffia Square Effect. I have run five marathons and I consistently run 35-45 miles every week. Training for marathons is a mostly selfish act. It requires getting up in the wee hours of the morning to run which often results in waking up 50% of the house by accident. If you are not running in the wee hours, someone (thank you, Jeff Harris) is watching your children. It rips your body to shreds which inevitability translates to constant complaining to family members. At least 50% (maybe 100% depending on who you ask) of every family activity has to be scheduled in a good non-running window. Suffice to say, running can become obnoxious for those around you.

However, I can't give up pasta, cheese or bread (in moderation of course) and I can't stop running either. I can merge my "pastime" with our family's support of the AHA though and set a good example for my kids at the same time.

I will be running the Chicago Marathon in October as a member of the American Heart Association's Run For Heart Team and will be raising money to help the AHA continue their mission so more people in our communities can live long, healthy lives. My husband, two children, nieces and sister-in-law will all be there to support me and the AHA from the sidelines.

Maffia genetics will always be in play for me, but ongoing education, access to great healthcare, and advances in technology made possible by the AHA will help keep me, my family, and my community alive and healthy.

It is an honor to work with the AHA and help them help everyone around us.

Salute!!!!

To donate to this great cause in support of Alicia, follow the link [here](#).



Running together in the Charlotte Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving morning has become a tradition for the Harris family. Every year, out of town family members join Tatum, Alicia, Reagan and Jeff for the annual event.