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Lavonne Blakeslee, left, and Genevieve Essig tour the inside of a giant inflatable heart Saturday in Livingston.

Ways of the heart

Gigantic inflatable heart steals the show at Livingston health festival

By JODI HAUSEN

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LIVINGSTON — The big draw at the seventh annual Fall Health Festival at the Park County Fairgrounds Saturday was the giant inflatable heart.

The 12-foot-tall heart, big enough to walk through, demonstrated to festivalgoers how one of the most essential organs in the human body works.

Genevieve “Gene” Essig, 84, of Pine Creek, leaned on her cane after walking through the exhibit.

“I think it’s wonderful that they do this” because it is so informative, Essig said. “I come every year.”

Inside the heart’s upper and lower chambers, signs explained various abnormalities and how they affected the heart’s functioning. Endocarditis, one sign explained, is an illness caused when germs spread through the body and infects the heart, typically inflaming the valves.

Just outside the giant heart, physician’s assistant Michael Schallock, in a white lab coat, listened to people’s hearts and explained the finer points of the exhibit.

“A lot of people have misconceptions

about how the heart works,” he said. “It’s more complicated than just a pump.”

For example, many people believe the “lub-dub” sound of a healthy heart is the organ contracting. Actually, it is the various valves closing, Schallock said. Extra sounds may indicate something is wrong.

“People want to know how their heart works,” he added. “The more people know about heart health, the easier it is for people to be able to diagnose their heart problems.”

The heart was just one aspect of the busy festival, sponsored by Livingston HealthCare. The intent is to be both informative and fun, presenters throughout the hall said.

Music played as people had their blood pressure and oxygen saturation levels checked.

Others were vaccinated for the flu. “Mist or injection,” the health workers asked.

People also took fitness tests and watched a healthy cooking demonstration.

Ironically, the smell of frying bacon wafted past the colossal heart from the adjacent dining area. Breakfast was free to anyone over 60 years old, \$3 for anyone else.

The buffet included an oatmeal bar with seven-grain cereal and a variety of healthy toppings of nuts and dried fruits. But there was also a hot buffet, with scrambled eggs, including one tray with spinach, tomatoes and feta cheese added; two choices of hash browns, one

with vegetables; and bacon and sausage.

“We can’t take it all away without ticking some people off,” said Jessie Williams, Livingston HealthCare’s food and nutrition services manager said. “This is a traditional Montana breakfast. Moderation is the key.”

Even at the hospital, Williams said, she tries to retain some of those more traditional breakfast foods by altering the recipes. For a healthy version of biscuits and gravy, the cooks use whole wheat flour, skim milk and a butter alternative that works to reduce cholesterol.

And a lot of the hospital’s food comes from local producers, Williams said.

Putting tomatoes and spinach into eggs and hash browns (cooked in low-cholesterol oils like safflower or canola) provides additional servings of veggies, said Sandi Marlowe, community development director for the organization.

In essence, the breakfast serves to demonstrate “healthy ways to still eat traditional breakfast favorites,” she added.

Back at the heart Essig, 84, said she always learns something at the health fair.

“We listen to everything they tell us,” she said.

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