Having moved through life at a sprinter’s pace—from All-American swimmer to professional triathlete to firefighter—Rip Esselstyn ’82 added “best-selling author” to his extensive résumé with 2009’s The Engine 2 Diet.

Esselstyn, whose father, Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, is a world-renowned expert on preventing and reversing heart disease, crafted the Engine 2 Diet in 2003 specifically for James Rae, a fellow firefighter in Austin, Texas, whose cholesterol level had become dangerously high. After three weeks of a plant-based diet, Rae’s cholesterol count went from 344 mg/dL (a level considered “high risk” for coronary heart disease) to 196. Buoyed by those results, Esselstyn’s whole Engine 2 shift went “plant-strong”—“I never use the terms ‘vegan’ or ‘vegetarian,’” Esselstyn says—and remains that way even now.

“The medicine of the future is going to be nutrition,” Esselstyn says. “It’s all about prevention, and prevention starts with what you have at the end of your fork and your spoon. Seventy-five percent of America’s $2.3 trillion health-care bill comes from five chronic Western diseases—heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, obesity, prostate cancer, and breast cancer—all of which are either preventable or reversible through proper nutrition. That’s the tragedy that’s going on right now in America. It’s like everybody’s falling over this cliff, and we’re putting ambulances at the bottom of the cliff instead of just putting a fence up at the top.

“We are, as a country, probably in the worst shape we’ve ever been in, and what
we’ve been doing for the last 50 years is not working,” Esselstyn adds. “It’s time for a paradigm shift. We need a game-changer. This is it. Eating a plant-based diet has so many advantages outside of just yourself.”

Esselstyn’s Mercersburg career started when a friend prepared to enroll for a postgraduate year. “Somehow, he got the bug in my ear that it might be interesting to go to Mercersburg,” Esselstyn says. “I was a pretty good swimmer at the time, but not necessarily fantastic. And Mercersburg had what was considered to be one of the best swimming programs in the country for high school.

“The next thing I knew,” he says, “I was driving to Mercersburg with my mom, and we interviewed with the academic counselors. I met John ‘J.T.’ Trembley, the swim coach, and I was hooked. And the campus is absolutely gorgeous, so it just made sense on a lot of levels for me to leave where I was and go to Mercersburg for my last two years.”

In addition to swimming, Esselstyn played water polo and tennis. “I loved being part of the best high-school swimming program in the nation, I loved water polo, and it was a nice breather to get out of the water and air out by hitting some tennis balls around.”

Swimming led Esselstyn to a scholarship at the University of Texas, one of the NCAA’s top swimming programs. “J.T. Trembley is still one of the most inspiring, motivating coaches I’ve ever had in my life, and I will always be thankful for the time I had with him,” he says.

During Esselstyn’s four years with the Longhorns, Texas finished second (twice) and third (twice) at the NCAA men’s swimming championships. Trembley, who coached at Mercersburg from 1980 to 1988, is now the head men’s swimming coach at the University of Tennessee.

“I have nothing but wonderful and really fond memories of Mercersburg,” Esselstyn adds, “not only academically, athletically, and socially, but there’s just something about being a high schooler living in a dorm with other kids your age away from home. I treasure the wonderful friendships that developed and the bonds that occurred when you’re not only going to school with these people, but also living with them.”

Esselstyn was a three-time All-America swimmer at Texas, so he had no reason to question his eating habits. “I ate on the athletic training table with all the scholar-ship football players, basketball players, baseball players, and looking back on it, it was an absolute abomination what we ate,” Esselstyn says. “It was steak, it was hamburgers, it was cheese pizza, it was ice cream—it was all of the bad, none of the good.”

Within a year of his graduation, Esselstyn had become a professional triathlete, and nutrition was as important a part of his training as running shoes or a high-tech bicycle. Inspired by his father’s work, Esselstyn went “plant-strong” in 1987, despite the carnivorous leanings of the traditional training table.

“If you’re talking about football, basketball, baseball, or some of these kinds of maybe older traditional sports, athletes think that they need their meat and potatoes and all that stuff to fuel them,” Esselstyn says. “But when you get into sports like running, triathlon, and other sports that require more of an individualized mentality, you’re forced to look at everything you need to do as an athlete so you can be your best. Individual athletes are much more willing and receptive to hear, ‘Oh, so a plant-based diet will give me an edge. You’re saying this is the best way I can fuel my body’; then, they’re going to listen.”

Esselstyn brought the credibility from a decade-plus triathlon career to his job as a firefighter, so even a group of Texas firefighters bought into Esselstyn’s nutritional plan. “We had this health scare with J.R.’s cholesterol, and it was a unifying factor for us, really, to save his life,” he says. “So in an act of solidarity, as a group of guys and brothers in a family, we set about eating all plant-based pretty much by the next shift.”

As his researcher-father might have done, Esselstyn sought a study to see if his nutritional plan would hold up to the scrutiny of formal research. Following two stringent studies and dozens of volunteers whose overall health improved as they changed their eating habits, the word about the Engine 2 Diet spread like, well, wildfire.

After Esselstyn’s book came out, he appeared on numerous national TV shows (including NBC’s Today). In October, Esselstyn partnered with Whole Foods Market; the national chain will offer a line of Engine 2 food products, and Esselstyn is helping Whole Foods roll out a healthy-eating initiative. Each Whole Foods store will have Engine 2 “lifestyle teams” and offer cooking classes based around the Engine 2 Diet.

“I’ve had a number of people tell me, ‘If a bunch of guys from a firehouse in Austin, Texas, can do this, any house in America should be able to do this,’” Esselstyn says. “What people need to realize is that you start eating this way, and you realize you are not depriving yourself one iota—you’re empowering yourself, and it’s with tasty foods that make you feel great and fill you up. These guys weren’t going to do it if it didn’t meet all those criteria, and it did to the nines, and everybody’s health thrives. There’s really no downside; it’s all upside.”

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