

# CLIFTON PARK

## Neighbors

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*Maria Decker*  
Spreading Her Passion for a  
Healthy Lifestyle





## Maria Decker

### Spreading Her Passion for a Healthy Lifestyle

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Mary Flores Photography & Contributed by the Decker Family

Maria Decker knows food.

Her grandfather owned a restaurant on Long Island, and Maria and her brother, Angelo Mazzone, would often take the train from their hometown of Massapequa, NY to “work” when they were only 14 years old. When not at the restaurant, Maria was always active. She loved school and was involved in many extracurricular activities over the years. She was president of her sorority and secretary of her class as well. Maria grew up in a fun neighborhood where they were always outside playing a game or at the nearby beach.

Life took a turn when her father died at only 34 years old of a massive heart attack. Many of his siblings had died as well, and as Maria got older, she wanted to take action. She dove into learning about heart disease and prevention. After hearing that one out of every three women died from heart disease, she knew she wanted to raise awareness because it can be preventable.

At 19 years old, Maria moved to California and took college business and cooking courses. “I was there for ten years and became very healthy,” she says. “It’s so easy in California because you have such great access to healthy food, it’s just part of life. Growing up in a big Italian family and my grandfather owning a bread company and pizza places, we ate a lot. When I came back, they all said, ‘you don’t eat like us.’ Then that was a hard task to get them healthy.”

After she came back home to the east coast, she took a job as a waitress at a restaurant in New Jersey where she met the owner, Robert Decker. The two eventually married and continued to live in NJ for 15 years but visited the Capital Region often. Her brothers had settled here and were expanding their business, Mazzone Hospitality, with various restaurants and businesses. Maria’s family loved the area, and as the cost of living in NJ kept rising, they decided to move up here permanently, settling





in Clifton Park. Angelo was opening the Hall of Springs at the time, and he asked Robert to run one of the other locations. Her son, Sean, had already been working with her brothers on his school breaks. After college, he came back and eventually became VP of Mazzone Hospitality. Robert now owns his own heating and cooling business, American Heating & Cooling, which he has been running for over 20 years. Maria has four children: Dean Willcoxon (45), a pharmaceutical rep; Sean Willcoxon (43), Operations Manager at Performance Industrial; Jenna Ouimet (35), stay-at-home-mom; Jaclyn Scates (33), Senior Manager Enterprise Sales for Adobe; and eight grandchildren: Sean (12), Penelope (11), Giselle (8), Reese (9), Adam (11), Isabella (6), Robert (4), Logan (3).

Maria also worked with her brother while raising her children but found her passion 15 years ago when she opened a café at SEFCU's corporate office. Barbara Hess from SEFCU asked her to cater a Circle of Red meeting for the American Heart Association (AHA) at the café. Maria was all in. Listening to the grim statistics at the meeting, Maria knew she wanted to do all she could to change those numbers. She joined Circle of Red on the spot and has worked tirelessly since to spread their message. In addition to her other volunteer activities with the

group, Maria is heavily involved with BetterU, an AHA program that takes 12 women and teaches them how to get healthy from the inside out. "We usually have over 100 women apply. After going through applications, we pick 25 and interview them and keep 12," she explains. "We teach them to shop, cook healthy, exercise, emotional healing. I meet with them every week; I have a team also. They have to exercise 3-4 times a week. Planet Fitness gives them a free membership, they get a trainer, Sage College has their dietitian interns meet with them also. It's a lot of work, a lot of fun, very emotional—the women become very close and such good friends and stay close and help each other. It is a WONDERFUL program!"

"Heart disease remains the leading cause of death for women, but with proper lifestyle changes, it is largely preventable," says Dr. Radmila Lyubarova, cardiologist and associate professor of medicine at Albany Med. "Albany Med and the AHA have a special 'Live Fierce' collaboration to improve heart health in the Capital Region. The BetterU is exactly the sort of program that will allow women to be in charge of their own health, learn healthy lifestyle habits, and to take measurable actions to prevent heart disease."

Often, as the primary caregivers in the household, women tend to spend the majority of their time caring for others while their own health gets pushed to the wayside. This program teaches the participants how to incorporate their own wellness into







their everyday lives. CDPHP provides biometric screenings at various intervals throughout the 12-week program to track the women's blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and BMI. In addition to their own workouts, the group of women meets weekly for a group workout and support sessions. After the intensive 12-week program is completed, the participants can go on to the BetterU Alumnae Program where they can continue the support they've received during their training.

In addition to her involvement in AHA's various events, Maria also serves on the Board of Directors. In 2021, she received the Jane Golub Crystal Heart Award—a special award started three years ago when Jane Golub passed away. Jane was a healthy living advocate and, along with her husband Neil Golub, a sponsor of BetterU and the Breast & Heart Center at Bellevue Hospital. "I was so honored to receive this award," says Maria. "I looked up to Jane. She was such an incredible woman."

Through the years, Maria has owned multiple businesses, including Zia Maria's Café in the Price Chopper Plaza. She wanted to spend more time with the kids, so she shut it down and opened corporate cafés where the hours were only 8-2 with no nights or weekends. She was involved with all her kids' PTAs, was president of the Shen Booster Club when her son played football, and was in charge of the food stand at the girls' softball field while her husband coached. After the kids were grown, Maria eventually decided it was time to get back to her own healthy eating café and opened Maria's Bowls and Smoothies at the River Street Market in Troy shortly before COVID hit. The pandemic temporarily shut them down. They managed to stay afloat using DoorDash until the building reopened and are slowly working their way back. Serving only heart-healthy options, Maria's has a selection of hearty smoothies; smoothie, grain, breakfast, and oat bowls; as well as grain toasts, juiceries, and coffees. Many of the selections are gluten free and vegan. They also offer custom catering options.

In addition to running her own place, Maria manages the vendors at the River Street Market for First Columbia, the owners of the building. Located on the Hudson River with a deck overlooking the water, River Street is an upscale food hall with six vendors and a large sitting area and catering space. Open from 8-6 on Mondays & Tuesdays and 8-8 Wednesdays-Fridays, River Street offers various events each month including trivia nights and live music. The largest food hall in the Capital



District, River Street Market also hosts parties and fundraisers. Since the pandemic hit, they've taken measures to keep their customers safe. Adhering to CDC guidelines, all the vendors wear masks and gloves. HEPA air filters have been installed in addition to increased sanitizing, generously spaced tables, cashless transactions, sanitization stations, and contactless doors and elevators.

Besides her work with the AHA, Maria is also involved with Troy Bid, the United Way, and the Food Co-Op. She loves to spend time with her family, often going on vacations together. Maria loves to travel. She's enjoyed her trips to the Jersey Shore, Arizona, Italy, cross country, and Aruba, and is always looking forward to her next trip. She volunteers wherever she can, hosts a Bible study group, works out three times a week at Clifton Park Pilates, and is passionate about life. "I LOVE family, love to cook, love being outdoors, love the beach and traveling. Love to help people and volunteer. Love my café and serving people good food. Love my church, faith, and helping there too." During the pandemic, her neighborhood cul de sac started circle parties, creating a time for the neighbors to get together and share life. They had so much fun, they decided to continue them and host the event two times a month.

Maria urges everyone to take time for their own wellness and to live a healthy lifestyle. "Stay healthy, know your body and take care of it," she urges. "And always be kind."

**Visit Maria's at [Mariastroy.com](http://Mariastroy.com).**

