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The American Heart Association awarded Rev. Billy Russell of Greater Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in Minneapolis, with the 2009 Start! Lifestyle Change Award at its annual Twin Cities Start! Heart Walk on Saturday, April 25, at Harriet Island Park in St. Paul.

Russell was chosen the winner among six finalists honored during a small presentation at the event. More than 50 people were nominated for the award.

The Lifestyle Change Award recognizes individuals who have made positive changes to improve their quality of life and health over the past year such as losing weight, becoming active, eating healthier and/or managing chronic diseases such as diabetes. Finalists were chosen based on criteria evaluating the significance of the change that was achieved; any obstacles that were surpassed in achieving the goal; and the power that positive lifestyle change had not only on the individual achieving it but also those around him/her (i.e. family, friends, co-workers, community). The Twin Cities 2009 Lifestyle Change Award was sponsored by UnitedHealthcare.

Russell, nominated by a church member, was told last year at his annual physical that if he did not lose weight he would not live another two years. So with the help of diet and exercise, Russell lost 90 pounds and his cholesterol and blood pressure are back to normal. But Russell took it a step further.

He set out to convince his congregation to live healthier lives, too. He became a Power To End Stroke Ambassador for the American Heart/American Stroke Association to teach his congregants and community about the risk factors for stroke since the African American population has twice the risk of stroke. He went on to establish a parish nurse ministry and received a grant to set up an exercise room at the church so his community members had the tools and education to take action to live healthier and lower their risks for heart disease and stroke.

The other finalists included Mike Maguire, mayor of Eagan who lost over 50 pounds after surviving cancer; Melissa Conway, who quit smoking and lost 100 pounds to be a healthier mother; Jackie Miller, who started walking to counteract the effects of a desk job and lost 100 pounds; Laura Rutz, who quit smoking and lost 100 pounds to manage the grief of losing her husband; and Carol White who lost 70 pounds to manage her family history of diabetes.

The Twin Cities Start! Heart Walk is the American Heart Association’s premier community event that aims to bring people together to celebrate the importance of being physically active and living healthy and to raise funds for research and public education. The 2009 Twin Cities Start! Heart Walk brought over 30,000 people to Harriet Island on April 25 and raised over $1.6 million.