



VICTORY
OVER
OBESITY



Dedication

This book is dedicated to Andrew Hangartner and Kimberly Elliott, owners and trainers at Alpha Elite Training in Arizona who made me believe that my story was worth telling. Not only did they help me with the writing of this book, but also with the writing of my new life.

These two amazing people invested more of themselves in my life than is professionally expected of personal trainers and far exceeds what I could ever repay monetarily. They took this quiet, introverted, naïve woman and molded her into an Alpha Female. They taught me to see the value of who I am, to let go of the negative people around me and to be unapologetic about how I live my life. They provided me with the opportunity to experience things I kept myself from doing because of what I thought others might think of me. They got into my head and helped me figure out who the real Lisa is. They loved me when I felt unlovable. They are not just great friends, they are family and I am forever grateful to them.

To find more about Alpha Elite Training, please visit the following sites:

<https://www.facebook.com/#!/AlphaElite?fref=ts>

<https://theteamelite.com>

Acknowledgments

One of the things I learned during my transformation was the value of a good, strong support system. I could not have made the changes in my life that I did without the love and support of those listed below.

The group that was probably most affected by this process was my family. My mother and sister Terri, had to put up with my strict eating schedule and my obsession with working out. Social activities were scheduled around my workouts. And there were the seemingly endless hours I spend behind the computer writing this book. My other siblings, Radine, Jeff, John and Mark, as well as their families, were all very supportive. They accepted the changes I had made in my life and never tried to sabotage my efforts. It couldn't have been easy adjusting to the different person I had become.

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Because of this support system, I was able to regain control of my life and am now the happiest I have ever been. Thank you all from the bottom of my now strongly-beating heart.

Victory Over Obesity

Imagine for a moment that you are on a tropical beach. What do you see and feel? Perhaps the scene is something like this. You are reclining on a blanket near the water's edge with the warm sun kissing your exposed skin. Your hair is waving in the gentle breeze. You have a cool drink in one hand and reach into the picnic basket for a sandwich with the other. You make eye contact with a good-looking man or woman nearby and smile flirtatiously. You feel like going for a stroll so you get up and head toward the water's edge so you can walk in the waves.

It is a relaxing, beautiful scene, isn't it?

Now picture yourself 100, 200, maybe even 400 pounds heavier. How does the scene change? First, you are probably not on the water's edge, you are likely much closer to the parking lot because the trek across the sand was just too exhausting to go any further. The warm sun is being deflected from your skin by the cover-up you are wearing or the towel you have draped around you to keep other people from seeing your grotesque body. Your hair isn't blowing in the wind because the sweat you produced from just walking the short distance from the car is weighing it down. You carried your super-sized soda cup with you, but there is no picnic basket. Instead, you ate fast food in the car on the way to the beach because you were hungry and just couldn't wait any longer. You turn your eyes away when that good-looking man or woman looks your direction. You aren't confident enough in yourself to make eye contact. You imagine that the only reason that person looked at you was because you looked horrible. Abnormalities tend to earn stares. You conclude that after seeing you, that person had a look of disgust or pity on their face so you never look up at them again. That stroll that you wanted to take to put your feet in

the ocean never happened because hauling all of your weight across the soft sand would have been extremely difficult. Besides, trying to hoist your massive body up off the ground is both difficult and awkward. So, you sit there and watch while the people who came with you are off running in the waves, building sand castles and chasing a Frisbee around. At least you are getting fresh air.

The second scene is definitely not a pretty image but it was my reality for 20 years. Because of my short stature (5'0") and the amount of weight I carried (340 pounds) I can best be described as having looked like a barrel. I literally measured larger circumferentially than in height. My body mass index (BMI) was 66.4. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines a health BMI as between 18.5 and 24.9. BMI's 25 to 29 are considered overweight, 30 – 39 is obese, 40 – 49 is morbidly obese and over 50 is super obese. But that is where the chart appears to stop. I was over 16 points higher than that. I found one website that defined people with a BMI greater than 60 as being super-super obese. That is definitely not something to be proud of. There are actually National Football League teams that don't have even one player on their roster who weigh as much as I did and many of them are more than 15 inches taller than I am.

This is the story about how in 2008 I decided it was finally time to take control. Over the next three years, I dropped 208 pounds. I did not have bariatric surgery. I did not take any weight loss drugs. I possess no super skills. I was over the age of 40, which many believe is when it becomes even more difficult to shed the pounds. I did it all through diet, exercise, hard work and determination. It was a long, hard process but I persisted and I won. In the process I believe I gained so many more years of life - not just years, but *quality* years.

1

There is nothing either fun or funny about being obese. There are the obvious medical issues that are bound to arise such as, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, sleep apnea and knee and back problems. But that is just half of it. The other half involves low self-esteem, being passed up for job promotions and lack of a quality social life. The mental and emotional issues surrounding being obese can be equally, if not more, debilitating as physical ones.

Everyday living was difficult for me, starting with getting up in the morning. Once I actually paid attention to my alarm clock I literally had to roll out of bed. I could not just wake up and rise to a seated position. I didn't have the strength in my abs to be able to do that. Once I hoisted myself out of bed, I would head to the bathroom to take a shower. I had trouble getting into the shower as I had to step up and over the side of the tub, hauling my massive body up and over the side of the tub. Taking a bath was not an option. I would have had to wedge myself in the tub and the amount of water displaced when I sat down was such that there was the threat of the tub overflowing. Once my shower was done, I had to find a way to keep the areas of my skin that constantly rubbed together dry, particularly my groin area and underneath my breasts. Baby powder and cornstarch were effective for a while, but they were messy. While applying the powder, there was always some that ended up on the floor and on my clothes. And since I almost always wore black or navy blue pants to try to appear smaller, the powder and cornstarch just weren't the solution. I finally came across an anti-chafing gel made for runners. I carried it with me everywhere and had to reapply it frequently.

Then it was time for breakfast. Standing, even for the short amount of time it took to cook anything, made my back hurt so I ate a lot of bagels and peanut butter. Top Ramen was my

favorite breakfast food and sometimes I'd "treat" myself and have it. That was only when I actually allowed time in my schedule to prepare breakfast. More often I would stop at McDonalds on the way to work and get a breakfast combo with extra hash browns, of course. Those extra hash browns were eaten in the car in the mile drive from McDonalds to my work. Nobody needed to know that I had bought the extra hash browns. They might think I was a glutton.

Lunch was usually bought from the restaurant next door to my work. They liked me in there. I think I kept them from going out of business during the slow season. On the rare days I actually brought my lunch a co-worker would usually be going out to get food and would ask if I wanted anything. What they were getting always sounded much better than what I had brought so I accepted the offer. What I brought for lunch was then either a snack or was put in the refrigerator for a day when I didn't have enough money to buy something to eat.

By the time my weight was really out of control, I had become a master at being efficient. I would do things in a certain order, place things in a certain location and manage my time in such a way that I could make the most of my time. No energy was wasted. At my job, anything I needed to complete my assigned tasks was thoughtfully placed within arms reach. I never had to leave my workstation for supplies because I had plenty of extras sitting close at hand. I prioritized tasks not just based on importance, but also by what would have me going the shortest distance possible. It all appeared so orderly. I saw this as a positive trait, but in reality, all it did was make it so I didn't have to ever move from one spot. There was no point in burning a few calories, right?

After work, I would go home and crash on recliner chair. I called it my magic chair. Almost as

soon as my rear hit the chair, I fell asleep. Part of the reason for that is because I was kind of trapped by the chair, taking up all the available space. Once I was in the chair, there was no room to move at all. Lack of movement in my life at that time meant sleep. I rarely watched an entire television show. I couldn't keep my eyes open that long. It was after all, a long, exhausting day and work. I earned the right to just lounge the rest of the night. However, I never missed dinner because of my tiredness. Just like at work, no time or energy was ever wasted in the kitchen. I would usually just go in and throw something in the microwave or more often, pick something up to eat from a fast food restaurant on the way home from work. Fast, easy and cheap...Not healthy.

Other than sitting on my butt watching baseball games and doing crossword puzzles, my usual form of entertainment was the occasional movie at the local theater. The motivation behind going there was the popcorn. I loved movie theater popcorn. I didn't really care what the movie was because it was all about the popcorn. We aren't talking about your standard small bag of popcorn. It was always the jumbo bag (the best value for your money). When I ordered the popcorn, I made sure they filled the bag halfway, put butter on that half, then filled the rest of the bag and put more butter on top. When the theaters started offering the flavored powders that you could add, I sprinkled just a little on then poured a bunch down the side of the bag. That resulted in there being a large amount of flavoring in the bottom of the bag when I got down that far. That never took long. There was not point in taking home old popcorn to eat later.

Trying to haul my massive body around a grocery store took more energy than you can imagine. If there had been a drive-thru grocery store, I would have shopped that way, no matter how much extra I had to pay. Why did they insist on putting the stuff I wanted in the back of the store? No matter how many items I went in there for I grabbed a shopping cart to lean on. I leaned both

forearms on the handle, leaned forward and supported some of my weight that way. It was really the only way I was going to be able to make it down all the aisles I needed to go down. Though I am not sure you could call what I did walking. It was definitely more of a waddle. I was after all, carrying an extra 200 pounds on me. Just image yourself lugging five 40-pound bags of dog food strapped to your body every time you walked. I am sure you wouldn't walk right either. I hurt. My feet screamed in pain, my back ached and my breathing was labored. When it came time to stand in line to check out, the only way I could get any relief at all was by alternating resting one foot then the other on the bottom of the cart. It took a lot of pressure off my feet and back...at least temporarily. The trip back out to the car with my load was just as exhausting. If I had timed my trip to the store right, I was fortunate to not have to push my cart too far. I always parked as close to a cart return rack as possible. I didn't want to have to push the cart any farther than I had to. Then there was the process of unloading the groceries once I got home. I refused to make more than one trip into the house because it would mean extra work, so I grabbed every bag I had and hauled them in the house at one time.

I really did feel like a big blob of clay. There was no telling how or where the fat was going to settle itself when I sat down. All of the fat from the hips up was shoved upward. I sometimes felt like those cans of biscuits that pop open when you pull the string. Everything I wore was stretchy. They had to be because when I sat down whatever clothes I had on were stretched to their maximum size. If I wore a button-up shirt the spaces between the buttons would become huge openings exposing my skin. It was not a pretty sight. Eventually, I had a seamstress friend of mine sew the front of my shirts closed and I just put them on by pulling them on over my head.

I wasn't just obese. I also had a large amount of fat, called a panniculus, which hung from my

abdomen almost to my knees. That made walking extremely difficult. It was much like having a couple sacks of potatoes attached to my waist and hanging down in front of me. With every step I took the leg I was stepping forward with had to push against that mass in order for me to have any forward movement at all. When my feet came to a stop the rest of me didn't, there was always some lingering movement. Psychologically, my barrel-shaped body had me feeling like I was not a woman. I am not saying I felt like a man, I was just kind of an asexual blob.

The weight didn't just take a toll on me physically; it was also hard on me mentally and emotionally. I didn't realize it then, but my self-esteem was pretty low. I seldom offered up my opinions or suggestions. I might have imagined some of it but, it seemed as if any time somebody would ask a group of us for suggestions mine were always discounted. The more that happened the less I believed that I had anything valuable to contribute to decisions or other important conversations. Why would anybody listen to someone who let their weight get so out of control? The more my ideas were discounted, the less I contributed. Eventually, I just convinced myself that whatever it was, it didn't matter one way or the other to me. Eventually, I had no opinions; I just went with the flow.

As you can see, life for those 20 years was difficult. Sure, it had its fun moments, but basically I just learned to deal with my condition and convinced myself I was happy. To keep from facing my problems I buried myself in the welfare and desires of others. I really enjoyed being there for other people. I was always there to support others in whatever they were involved with. People knew they could come to me for anything. I became the wind in their sails. I always thought it was appropriate that if you scramble my first name, and then scramble my last name, you get "sail blower," because that is exactly what I was. But, by involving myself so much in helping others I lost my sense of self.

I actually made a co-worker cry just because of my appearance. She told me that the first time she saw me struggling to waddle across the parking lot at work, she shed some tears thinking about how hard that must have been for me. You can't imagine how bad that made me feel to know that my appearance had that affect on somebody.

2

People often ask what led to my weight gain. My answer had always been that I loved to eat and I was good at it. And I believed that too until Andrew, a personal trainer I worked with after I dropped most of the weight, interrupted our training session one night and said, “Nobody gains 200 pounds just because they like to eat.” I have no idea why he decided to pick that moment to challenge me about that belief. We hadn’t been discussing anything even close to that topic. As a matter of fact, it was during a session where there was little conversation at all, which was rare. I wasn’t sure how to respond. It was the first time anybody ever questioned my belief that my enjoyment of food caused my obesity. I guess he felt it was time I finally address the issue and figure it out. He was big into the mental wellbeing of his clients, so I believe he probably confronted me so that I could continue my personal growth and, reaching a place where my mental and emotional health were as sound as my physical health. I needed to meet my demons head-on.

Those demons started to show their faces as I was driving to work the following morning. I was thinking about Andrew’s statement and stumbled upon what I believe to be the start of it all. It was the death of my father, three weeks after my 16th birthday. More specifically, it was the way I handled his death, which was the way I handled everything: I stuffed my emotions. I suppressed my emotions and I still do. I try to hide any negative feelings from others. To me the feelings of sadness, frustration, anger and disappointment are signs of weakness. I feel I should be in control of my mind and should be able to handle all of those negative but normal feelings, without bothering other people with them. So to hide them from others, and myself, I stuff them inside me. I just keep stuffing and stuffing them in. The more I suppress the more toxic it is. To

medicate against those feelings, I stuff in food. Food understands me and won't judge my emotional weaknesses. But, food also won't make anything better. I knew I had to be on the right track with my thinking when as soon as I started reliving that memory the first thing I wanted to do was stop at the nearest convenience store and buy a candy bar and a bag of chips.

My father died of a massive coronary, probably from the effects of smoking close to two packs of cigarettes a day, a habit he picked up when he was 14 years old. He was not overweight; he was active and seemed to handle life's challenges well. He was rarely ill, so his passing came as a complete shock.

He passed on a Saturday. I was at home preparing to go play with the marching band at the high school football game. My father had been feeling ill all morning. His remedy for all of his ails was aspirin and a hot bath. He had taken his hot bath and my mother had just given him aspirin. Suddenly, he just collapsed on the bed and became unresponsive. My mother thought maybe the aspirin was stuck in his throat so she fished in his mouth with her finger, but couldn't find anything. She quickly called 911 and I went outside to direct the paramedics when they arrived. In a matter of minutes, the EMTs pulled up and raced up the stairs to the bedroom. They worked on my father for a while and finally transported him to the hospital, not giving us any information about his condition. After what seemed like an eternity, my mother was escorted from the waiting room to the emergency room where she was told that they were unable to revive him.

I dealt with my father's death the best I could. Unfortunately, I tried handling it alone. It wasn't that I was alone; it was that I *felt* alone. I am one of six children (three boys and three girls) born to a well-respected couple who seemed to really love each other. I never saw my parents argue.

None of my siblings got into any serious trouble with the law or drugs. We were a close family, but we never really communicated our thoughts and feelings. Don't get me wrong, we shared things like how our day went, what we were going to do that weekend and things like that. But we never hugged each other and I can't remember ever going to my family for advice. We are a family of independent individuals.

Neither of my sisters lived at home when my father died, so they weren't around while I was struggling to deal with the loss. Besides, my sisters are five and ten years older than I and were living their own lives as young adults in other cities. They had their own issues that they had to deal with. Even if they had been around, that communication probably would not have taken place. Because they were so much older we didn't have a lot in common. I didn't feel they would want to deal with my juvenile problems. So I never spoke to them about any of my concerns and feelings, and there were a lot of them.

The two siblings closest to me in age were boys. I certainly didn't feel I could go to them with my issues. They often teased me for being overly sensitive. They didn't understand that is how girls operate. So I got in the habit of hiding my feelings. Sure, I would cry. I actually cried a lot, but it was always in the privacy of my own room.

My mother had to deal with the loss in her own way. She had to be strong for her children while at the same time try to fill the time she used to spend with her husband. She buried herself in her work. She got involved in many different programs and activities. I followed her example and kept myself so busy that I didn't have time to think about how sad I was.

The other group I might have turned to for support after losing my father was my friends at school. However, I felt isolated from them. As far as I knew, they all still had their fathers. I had

a lot of good friends and we would have great conversations, but never about my loss. I know they didn't want to see me sad and tried their hardest to cheer me up, but they didn't help me work through the grief.

I was at a normal weight until that point. I know that one event did not cause me to gain 200 pounds. It was however, the first time I can remember using food to medicate. I suppressed all of those negative feelings and they began to marinate inside, causing a kind of hunger for something to come along to make me feel better. And what better way to satisfy a hunger than to eat? Food was always there. I could count on it. I knew exactly how I was going to feel after eating it. There was comfort in the feeling of going from being hungry to being full. I began to look forward to every meal. I started to take great pleasure in eating. I also developed what I refer to as an addiction to chocolate. Whether chocolate addiction is real or not, I could not control myself around it. Whatever size container the chocolate came in I considered it to be one serving. Other sweets didn't seem to have the same effect on me. I have seen reports on the internet that say that eating chocolate releases endorphins in your brain, which gives you a pleasurable feeling.

Even though I have come a long way in learning to express my emotions and realizing that it is not only okay to cry in front of people but it's also healthy, there are still times I stuff my feelings inside. Being single at this point in my life means that there are days when I feel extreme loneliness. I do my best to hide it from people. I don't want them to pity me and I don't want my feelings to have any kind of impact on them. One such incident was on the night of Andrew's birthday party. A lot of his friends and clients were invited to a surprise party for him. Everybody had a great time, including me. But as the party was winding down and people were starting to leave, I was hit with the realization that nearly everybody there was with a spouse or

boyfriend/girlfriend. Those who were there alone were going home to somebody. I think there was only a couple of us who were single and would be going home alone. One of the ladies I thought was in the same boat as me just finished telling us about her new boyfriend. That kind of drove a dagger into me. I think I did a good job of stuffing my emotions as I said my goodbyes, but when I got to my car I locked myself in and had a good cry. I felt better after that. Even though I didn't share my feelings with others, I did release them and resisted the urge I had to go through the drive-thru at the closest fast food restaurant to get food for the solitary 30-minute drive home. I never told Andrew about it. I didn't want it to ruin the memory of a great night.

3

I was not overweight as a child. I was active, played on softball, soccer and basketball teams, and generally burned more calories than I took in. I did put on a few extra pounds in my last two years of high school though. When I graduated, I think I weighed in the vicinity of 165 pounds. Considering my short stature, 165 pounds was definitely on the heavy side, but it certainly wasn't too much of a concern. It wasn't until college that I began to experience the steady weight gain. I was a full-time student and had taken a part-time job to pay for the tuition. My activity level dropped significantly and I was living in the dormitory. Meals from the cafeteria were included in the cost of the dorms, so I had the freedom to eat whatever and as much as I wanted...and I did. Since I was in class, at work or studying most of the time, sitting in the cafeteria at mealtime became my only real opportunity to socialize. You often hear talk of the "Freshman 15." It is common for college freshmen to put on about 15 pounds due to the changes and stresses of this new life. I experienced the freshman 15. As a matter of fact, I didn't stop there. I experienced sophomore and junior 15 as well. I realized my weight was increasing, but just didn't feel the need to immediately address the issue. I figured there would be time to do that when I was done with school and had settled in to a normal adult life. Once I left college however, I got so involved with just living my life that I didn't really pay attention to my health. I mean, there were many other things to worry about - work, paying my bills, car repairs, etc. So I just went on about my life.

Over the next 20 years I ate and ate, hitting a maximum of 340 pounds. At least I think that was my maximum. A lot of years passed without me ever getting on a scale. I couldn't. I had a beam scale in the house that I didn't fit on. My stomach was pushed up against the bar. I even tried to stand on it backward. That didn't work either. I had the same problem with my backside that I had with my

stomach. And the standard digital and dial scales didn't read high enough. I was never seriously ill and visits to the doctor were few and far between, so I was rarely weighed by a doctor.

I realized of course, that I needed to lose weight. I tried dieting on and off through the years, usually when the family was planning a trip somewhere. Each time, I would lose between 20 and 40 pounds, but the weight would come right back on because I was not willing to make the commitment to a lifetime of healthy eating and regular exercise. And I did not have the knowledge I have now about nutrition. My mind was filled with wrong thinking. What I thought was good for me was actually undermining my attempts to lose weight. I will go in to more detail about this later. I was fortunate that my health was not affected by my weight. I did not have high blood pressure and I was not diabetic. Therefore, I never really felt there was a rush to drop the weight. I figured I would do it eventually. I just wasn't ready to commit. I never admitted just how out of control I was, not even to myself. I had learned how to deal with any issues that arose because of my weight. Usually, dealing with it meant I went into hiding. I would decline invitations to go out with friends, find an excuse not to go do something active and instead find a nice way to relax. I worked hard, sometimes three jobs, and I deserved to relax. At least that was my way of justifying lying around the house all day. I really had no social life for more years than I care to remember.

I felt very fortunate to have people in my life that accepted me the way I was. The weight never seemed to bother my family or friends. Nobody ever suggested that I go on a diet. If they had, I probably would have resented them for it. Many of my coworkers were also overweight, just not to the extreme that I was.

When I was at my heaviest, I worked at a day program for adults with developmental disabilities. There is something about that industry that draws out-of-shape people to its employ. Perhaps it is

that individuals with developmental disabilities are very much non-judgmental and generally lived their lives in a more relaxed, slow manner, which is perfect for staff members who struggle with their own physical issues and don't care to move around much. We would sit at the center most of the day teaching life skills, reading, socializing, doing crafts, a lot of things that didn't require much movement. Couple that with the ever-increasing budget cuts that put an end to any kind of activities that involved a fee (amusement parks, zoos, swimming pools) and you get a lot of people with not much physical activity.

We became a tight-knit group who often enabled each other to get bigger. We would usually eat fast food for lunch. Each of the staff members had a group of individuals to assist each day. It was not unusual for at least one individual in each group to bring money to buy lunch. That worked out well for me. I rarely allowed myself enough time in the morning to prepare a lunch so I bought food wherever the group ended up going. Also, to unite the entire program we would have potlucks and barbeques, always with the unhealthiest food you can imagine. Staff meetings were usually held at Starbucks, with Frappuccinos being the order of the day. Holidays, birthdays, any occasion, or no special occasion at all. We loved to celebrate life with food.

We did finally try to do something about it. Inspired by the reality weight loss shows we saw on television, we held our own weight loss contest. When we first discussed this contest, we realized we were going to have a problem finding a scale we could use. Two of us could not be weighed on a standard scale; we weighed too much. Somebody came up with the idea of going to the local recycling center and asking if we could use their industrial scale. Can you imagine how humiliating that would have been? I certainly would not have agreed to that. Finally, someone brought in a dial scale that sort of worked. The numbers on the dial went as high as 300 pounds and when the two of us who were the heaviest got on it, it continued past the 300 mark and started over with 1. We

figured since it kept going, it was weighing us fairly accurately, so, we agreed to use that one.

Eight of us each put in \$50. The \$400 prize would go to the first person to drop 50 pounds. You would think that a \$400 prize would be a huge motivation. It was for a while and I was leading at 38 pounds lost. Then one by one, people started dropping out, usually because they had found employment elsewhere. Each time someone left, we gave their money back. Eventually, there were just three of us left and we had all kind of lost our motivation. \$150 apparently wasn't enough to keep depriving ourselves of the food we loved. So we each took back our money and ended the contest. That became just another in a long line of weight loss failures and the pounds promptly returned.

Work wasn't the only place where my eating habits were bad. It was also terrible during my leisure activities. It got to the point where any trip to a ballgame, beach, amusement park, or any other event became more about the food than the actual event. There was much anticipation on my part about what kinds of foods each of these places had. It wasn't even so much about the base food itself as it was the topping, sauces, etc. The meat and the bun of the hamburger were really the insignificant parts. It was all about what was on the burger (bacon, cheese, barbeque sauce). And then there were the sides. I mean, you can't eat a hamburger and not have fries or coleslaw with it.

I had the goal of visiting every Major League Baseball stadium. I was interested in comparing different features of the ballparks. It goes without saying that one of the most important things I had to compare was the food. In order to do that, I had to buy the same thing at every stadium. I decided to compare the hot dogs and the nachos. Yep, both of them. It was certainly twice as much food as I needed, but I *had* to eat both at every stadium. It took many years to do it, but I visited them all and I had hot dogs and nachos at each of them. Okay, I also had peanuts and popcorn and whatever else

caught my fancy too. I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

My obesity led to other ailments, one of which was particularly dangerous. But, I wasn't the only one in danger. I put the lives of others in jeopardy. That ailment was sleep apnea. Sleep apnea is a condition where when the airway relaxes while you sleep, it closes up and your breathing stops. The body will eventually miss the oxygen and will wake up enough to start breathing again. These episodes can literally happen hundreds of times a night and can last from several seconds to a minute or more each time. As a result, there is no quality sleep and the body is worn down. This causes excessive daytime sleepiness. While I was never medically diagnosed with that condition, I was aware I had it. Family members told me that I would stop breathing when I slept. As time went by, I slept less and less because of this condition. I would sleep fitfully for about 30 minutes, then wake up and not be able to get back to sleep for at least 20 minutes. It got so bad that the only time I was able to get any meaningful sleep at all was when I slept sitting up in a recliner chair. I couldn't raise the footrest for two reasons. One was because it was broken and the other was because doing so would cause my legs to push up against the fat of my abdomen. It was quite uncomfortable. Having my feet hanging down like this all night caused my feet and ankles to swell. My feet were so swollen all the time that I had to wear a larger size shoes and the shoes had to remain untied or it would cut off the circulation. Trying to sleep became such a big source of frustration that I would purposely stay up until the wee hours of the morning until my body finally decided it was no longer willing to stay awake.

Because of the lack of sleep at night, my body tried to make up for it any chance it got. I would doze off just about anywhere that I sat for more than a couple of minutes. At baseball games I could usually make it through the first couple of innings, but as soon as I got comfortable enough (and finished eating the nachos and hot dog I had to have) my eyes started to close. The same thing

happened at the movies once I finished my large bucket of popcorn and box of candy. Believe it or not, I even rationalized that the reason I was getting the large tub of popcorn because it would take me longer to eat and the only time I could guarantee I wouldn't fall asleep while I was eating. Trying to sit through a sermon at church was near impossible and was often embarrassing, not just to me but to my family as well. I would be sitting comfortably in my seat and my head would just start nodding. I took to chewing gum, sucking on cough drops and pinching my hand to try to help. I even fell asleep a couple times sitting on the toilet.

The times I put myself, and others in danger was while I was driving. I was a like a loaded weapon on the road. That was because of the number of times I almost fell asleep at the wheel. Fortunately because I was aware of the problem, as I felt drowsy I would pretend I had a leg cramp and pull over to the side of the road to pretend to stretch out my muscle to get rid of the cramp. Actually, I was just trying to get some fresh air and movement to wake me up. That didn't work when I was on a longer trip with family members. I would be driving down the freeway and was suddenly overcome by sleepiness. My head would nod and the car would start drifting into another lane. My mother, rightfully in fear of her life, would ask, "Are you okay?" I always replied that I was okay and that there must have been a gust of wind or a groove in the road that pulled my car that direction. I am sure she knew I was lying. I am really surprised she ever got in the car with me.

I hate to admit this, but I have broken my share of chairs. One thing I was good at was sitting and I couldn't even do that safely. I broke dining room chairs, stadiums seats, canvas camping chairs and even toilet seats. I was an equal opportunity destroyer. The dining room chairs were oak with wood dowels joining the legs together. A couple of the chairs became unusable when I sat on them. There was a loud crack when I sat as the dowels, which had been glued into a hole, separated from one of the legs, causing the chair to become unstable. It is not a comforting feeling when you sit on a wood

chair and hear it cracking. But it happened more than once. I heard a similar cracking sound when I sat on a stadium's seat. I blamed it on the fact that the seats were not properly maintained, but I am sure it was just from the stress of trying to support a tremendous amount of weight. The toilet seats I broke were both wood seats in my own home. Sadly, they were fairly new so I couldn't blame it on general wear and tear. The canvas camping chair was one that I had brought to sit in at an outdoor concert at a local park. It was one that was designed for heavy people, yet as soon as I sat down the aluminum legs bent. I ended up sitting on the ground.

The larger I got the harder it became to travel. The trips usually required flying on a commercial airline. The discomfort and humiliation that I experienced as a fat person on airplanes ultimately led me to make the decision to stop flying. To start, walking down the aisle was hard both physically and emotionally. The aisles were just not wide enough for me to walk down without constantly bumping into people. I could see the expression in the eyes of the people sitting on the aisle when I started my walk toward my seat. They just knew they were going to get bumped into. And people sitting next to an empty seat displayed a look of concern about whether I would end up sitting next to them. I don't blame them. I was going to be just as uncomfortable. Once I had myself wedged in the seat, I was stuck there for the remainder of the flight, especially if the person in front of me reclined their seat. I frequently disembarked with bruises on my arms and outer thighs from the other passengers and the serving cart hitting me as they passed. And I don't know when the last time was that I used a restroom on an airplane. There was just not enough room in them to do what I needed to do. And try eating airline food without the use of a tray. I could pull it out to the point of it laying on my stomach, but it was at such an angle that it made it unusable. I had to use the tray table of the person flying with me who fortunately, was a family member.

My last flight took place before some of the airlines started charging obese people for two seats. One

seat was really not enough for me. Between the threat of the airlines charging me for two seats and the embarrassment of having a flight attendant approach me after I was seated and handing me a seatbelt extender, I decided avoid the humiliation by opting not to fly anymore.

4

If you have never had a weight issue you might not fully realize just how paralyzing obesity is. There is no aspect of life that is not influenced by an obese person's body. Jobs, relationships, travel, recreational activities, everything is different for someone who is fat. Being trapped in a body that does not match the person you are inside is like being in prison. You often find yourself on the outside of "normal" life looking in. I didn't really realize the impact it had on my life until I lost the weight. My way of protecting my emotional health and wellbeing was to convince myself that I was happy the way I was. I believed that I was the one making decisions, not my circumstances. I used to try to convince others that I was not participating in things because those activities were of no interest to me, not because I couldn't do them physically or because I didn't want to be embarrassed by being told my weight prohibited me from participating. I had also convinced myself. That is far from the truth.

Looking back at it now, there were many opportunities I passed up because of my weight, including pursuing my dream job. I wanted to be a sports writer. I had the opportunity to experience that profession when I worked in the sports department of a county newspaper for several years while I was attending college. I primarily put together the page with the box scores and standings, but I would also field calls from local high school and college coaches after a game and would write a few paragraphs for the next day's paper. This is how I found my love for sports writing. I had not reached the point yet where I was considered obese, but I was very overweight and was not at all comfortable with my appearance. By getting the information from the coaches by phone I was able to hide behind my computer. The person on the other end of the phone didn't know what I looked like. That job drew out the writer in me. I was knowledgeable in sports and enjoyed the atmosphere

of the newsroom.

When I left college I found a full-time job in a different field but I picked up part-time work covering the local high school teams for a small town newspaper. I was responsible for covering the teams from the high school I had attended and the coaches were the same coaches I played for. By that time, I was considered obese and did not want my former coaches to see me like that. I was a decent athlete in high school, winning several trophies for my efforts so reconnecting with the coaches and being able to write about their teams made me happy. At least I was happy while I was writing. But at this point in my life I was extremely ashamed of my appearance, so I made arrangements to have the coaches call me after games with their results. I used the excuse that since I was also working a full-time job, I didn't really have the time to go to the games. But, the reality was that I just couldn't bear to face them.

I would have like to have covered professional teams eventually. However, I gave up on that while working at that local paper. I took a good look at myself in the mirror and realized that I did not fit the image I had of a sports writer. I could not picture myself waddling up to a professional athlete asking questions about the game. I actually weighed over 100 pounds more than most of these athletes and I was at least a foot shorter than they were. I don't think I would have even made it onto the field. No sports department editor would have taken me seriously looking the way I did. If I didn't have the self-confidence and the editor didn't think I would represent the paper well, what chance did I have convincing a professional athlete that I knew what I was doing? So, just like with everything else, I pretended that it was my decision. I convinced myself that I was too much of a rooter to cover teams objectively.

5

Over the years, I made many attempts to lose the weight. With each attempt I had some success, but got tired of having to constantly monitor what I ate. I wanted to eat what everybody else was eating. I tried the Weight Watchers plan, though I never actually signed up or attended meetings. Then I tried Richard Simmons' Deal a Meal program. The exercise tapes were challenging and fun, but I quickly lost interest in the nutrition part of it. I got tired of being told what I could eat by a stack of cards. At one point, I also purchased a program I had seen on an infomercial that based your nutrition on the shape of your body. I opened up the box and made a half-hearted attempt at trying to figure out what my body shape was. I didn't seem to fit into any of the categories, so I quickly packed everything back in the box and stuffed it in the back of my closet. Nothing seemed to work. Of course the fact that I wasn't willing to fully commit to any of those programs didn't help.

When all of those nutrition plans failed me, or more accurately, I failed myself, I turned my attention to exercise equipment. I tried the Ab Rocker, a cross-country skiing machine, a stationary bike, an Aerofit glider and even a Jane Fonda manual foldaway treadmill (certainly Jane Fonda must have the answer). With the exception of the Ab Rocker, which appeared to be worthless, all of the exercise machines would have been helpful if only I had been motivated to use them for more than a month. I was just not ready to put in the amount of work that it was going to require to get results. And, I mistakenly believed that since I was exercising, I didn't have to pay much attention to what I was eating.

Finally, I decided I would just do my own thing and pay more attention to what I ate. I cut a lot of fat out of my diet and added a lot of fruits and vegetables. I was slowly, but surely losing some weight. But, there were many things I did wrong. First, while I added lots of salads to the diet, I did not

change the type or amount of dressing I was putting on it: blue cheese and lots of it. Also, I failed to realize that just because I switched to low-fat versions of the same food, it didn't mean I could eat more of it.

I came up with many, many excuses as to why I failed, none of which were my fault of course (the cost of diet food, lack of time, the weather, pain, etc.). These are things that I realize now are not valid excuses. There are ways of dealing with all of them. But at that time in my life those excuses were all valid.

6

It took many, many years for me to actually be in a place where I was mentally ready to make the commitment to the lifestyle change that was required to be successful in losing the weight and keeping it off. I spent 20 years of my adult life in an obese body.

In a roundabout way, my weight loss journey began because of the job I got after I moved from California, where I lived the first 40 years of my life, to Arizona. The human resources department at my place of business secured the services of an organization that operates a mobile mammogram unit. I had never had a mammogram or a breast exam before. I had never even been to a gynecologist. I had just turned 41 and decided that since my insurance was going to pay for the exam, I might as well take advantage of it. That procedure made me realize that I had been neglecting that part of my health. So I decided to get a well-woman check too. I had been having some female problems that I had been ignoring. For as long I can remember, I have had very irregular, heavy menstrual periods. I could go several months without one, have it for three days, go another couple of weeks without and then start up again. Sometimes I had a period that lasted a couple weeks. Shortly before I decided to get the well-woman check, I was passing extremely large clots. A couple were approximately the diameter of a soda can. It was at my first visit with the gynecologist that I found out that there was something seriously wrong.

Christmas Eve is generally a time of joy, a time to celebrate with family and friends. Yet, there I was on the receiving end of a phone call being told that my test results had come back and that I would be receiving a call from an oncologist's office to set up an appointment. That meant just one thing...the "C Word." I had cancer. The gynecologist said he didn't want me to worry through the holidays so he asked for the test results to be rushed. As soon as he found out, he called me. As

strange as it may seem, I felt no fear. I am strong in my faith and I knew everything would be okay. The fact that I was told on Christmas Eve may have even fed into that. Christmas is, after all, a time to celebrate hope and to reaffirm your faith.

On January 2, the gynecologic oncologist confirmed the diagnosis. He sat down with me and explained my options. He said that normally he recommends the surgical removal of the uterus and ovaries in cases like mine. However, he expressed his concerns about the risks involved because of my weight, including respiratory problems and the development of blood clots. I was told of a surgery he performed two weeks prior to this consultation. That patient was also very obese. She was still on a ventilator at the hospital and was not progressing as he had hoped. That story is what turned my mind toward finally taking weight loss seriously. I was finally ready to make the commitment to my health. If I had cancer in my body and it could be removed, then I was going to do everything in my power to make sure that happened. Little did I know just how much power I had in me.

At the time of my first visit with the oncologist, my body mass index (BMI) was over 66. Despite that number, the doctor never came out and said that I needed to lose weight. He simply stated the facts and said that we would deal with my treatment one step at a time. He suggested that we try hormone therapy first to see if we could reverse the cancer back to the point of being just hyperplasia. Then he advised that if the hormone therapy didn't work, he would go ahead and do the surgery. He tried to allay any fears I might have by telling me that he had done hysterectomies on people of my weight about once a month for the past 25 years, so he was familiar with the risks and ways to minimize those risks. But he added that if he ended up having to perform the surgery, I was going to have to do my part to help reduce the potential risks; specifically, I was going to have to keep moving to keep down the risk of blood clots.

During one of my pre-surgery appointments, the doctor explained that obesity is a major factor in the development of uterine cancer. According to the website www.cancer.gov, “obesity has been consistently associated with uterine (endometrial) cancer. Obese women have two to four times greater risk of developing the disease than do women of a healthy weight, regardless of menopausal status”. It goes on to say that “obesity has been estimated to account for about 40 percent of endometrial cancer cases in affluent societies.” Those statistics are staggering to me. I had no idea. I wish more people knew; it might save lives. Like they say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Unfortunately, the same website also indicates that there is no evidence that losing the weight will decrease that risk once it is there. But, losing the weight will definitely make it easier for your body to handle the surgery and make recovery easier.

Being diagnosed with cancer was the best thing to happen to me. I know that is a shocking statement to hear, but I truly believe it. My cancer diagnosis was the impetus to finally taking control of my health and really start living.

7

I knew that the first thing I had to do was address my horrendous eating habits and totally revamp my food intake. I decided to cut back on the amount of fat I was eating and cut down my portion sizes. I didn't enjoy cooking and had come to rely on fast food. Then there was my chocolate addiction. Recognizing that those two things were my biggest problems was the easy part. Doing something about it was going to take some determination. Since this all took place at the end of the year, I decided to make it my New Year's resolution to completely eliminate chocolate from my diet, cold turkey. My younger brother had done the same thing with specific foods in the past and he was very successful at it. If he could do it, then so could I.

I got online and purchased the book You on a Diet, which was written by Dr. Mehmet Oz. There is a lot of valuable information in that book. He was able to explain nutrition in a way that made sense. It all seemed so simple. It allowed me to forget all the times I failed in the past and believe that I could actually do it this time.

The book also emphasized the need to combine a good nutrition plan with exercise. There were no complicated movements suggested. He didn't tell you that you had to go out and buy expensive equipment. He basically stated that you just needed to get out and walk at least 30 minutes a day. As a matter of fact, that advice is stated over and over and over throughout the book. It is drilled into your mind. 30 minutes a day, no excuses. I could do that. At least, I thought I could. Actually, I figured that walking was probably the only exercise I could do at that point.

Making the decision to start walking was easy. Actually getting out there was hard, not because I

knew I would struggle with it physically, but I knew I was going to have issues with it mentally. I was very self-conscious. I had become aware of the fact that when I walked in public, people looked at me. With every step I took, my fat was pushed, jiggled and morphed around. How can you not stare at something like that? How can you not pity or be disgusted by someone whose shape resembles that of Grimace, the large, purple McDonald's character? I couldn't ever bear to look at myself. I didn't want to have to endure that humiliation. I just knew that anybody who saw me walking would be thinking, "look at that poor, fat slob out there walking. Why does she even bother?" My solution to walk either before the sun came up in the morning or after it had set at night. That way I could walk without being noticed since there would be very few people outside of their homes to see me. However, this presented an unanticipated issue. I found myself walking in the glow of the streetlights and this casts shadows of my profile on the sidewalk. I was horrified with my own image. It was discouraging to see what my shadow looked like as I walked. I was a jiggling blob. It hit me hard. A person should not be disturbed by their own shadow. But, what could I do? This was realistically the only form of exercise I was capable of doing. Obviously, walking with my eyes closed was not an option. So, I decided to concentrate on the ever-changing form in front of me. I watched as my image became longer and leaner as I walked away from the streetlights. I tried to imagine that my body was going to change during my journey as much as my shadow changed. The routes I selected had me making various loops around my neighborhood, each one a different distance. I was always close enough to home to stop when I just couldn't go any farther.

My first walk was excruciating. I chose to simply walk around the block. I had measured it with the car one day and found that it was only .4 mile. That seemed simple enough...until I actually started walking. In that .4 mile, I had to stop six times because my feet were hurting, my lower

back was in agony and I was having trouble breathing. Despite the pain, I was back out there the next day, and the next. I had made a commitment and I was going to keep it this time.

The more I walked, the easier it became. My speed increased, it became less painful and it was easier to breathe. I usually walked in the morning before I went to work. I found that I had more energy at work when I did that. I walked and walked - 30 minutes a day, every day, no excuses. The more I walked, the farther I was able to go in 30 minutes. I finally worked myself up to a mile, then 1.5 miles. I realize that is slow for most people, but I was happy with the progress.

The lady living next door saw me walking one day and said that she also needed to get out and get some exercise too. So we made arrangements to meet up every morning at 5:30 to walk. It was nice to have some company. She came out every morning even though I know she would have liked to have been going faster. She knew about the cancer and my commitment to lose weight. She was very supportive and let me dictate the speed and the distance. Eventually, my work schedule changed and I had to go for my walk earlier. That didn't work for her, so she stopped joining me. But, I continued my 30 minutes a day. And I continued to see results.

8

As I was working on my fitness, the oncologist was working on my cancer. Before he resorted to performing a hysterectomy, he prescribed hormone therapy. I was to take a hormone pill several times a day for six weeks. After the six weeks, I was to have a dilation and curettage (D&C) to scrape the lining of the uterus to see if there were still cancer cells present. The doctor warned that one of the side effects of the hormone pill was an increase in appetite. He knew I was trying to lose weight, so he told me that I should ignore the hunger unless it was actually time to eat, that I wasn't really hungry. Oddly, I didn't have an increase in appetite. It was actually just the opposite. I rarely felt hungry. That was fine with me and I used it to my advantage.

The D&C was done as an outpatient procedure. It was one of the scariest times of my life because of the way I reacted after surgery. I was put under general anesthesia and I had a difficult time coming out of the anesthesia. I can remember that as I was waking, people were yelling at me to breathe. I had told them ahead of time about the sleep apnea, so they had intubated me. But, when they pulled the tube out and I was expected to breathe on my own, I reacted the same way I did when I slept. I would just stop breathing until I needed to. They had to put me on oxygen for a while to keep my blood oxygen level where it needed to be. It really is scary to realize that I couldn't even breathe when I was supposed to because I was fat.

The hormone therapy didn't work. So we decided to proceed with the hysterectomy. By then, I had lost a total of 60 pounds and had greatly improved my lung capacity and circulation from all the walking I was doing. But, just because the risks were down, didn't mean that my size and weight weren't still a problem.

After about three hours in the operating room, I awoke and was moved into a room where I spent the next three nights. As it turned out, they had me on the telemetry floor with the cardiac patients, not on the floor where the other cancer or hysterectomy patients were recovering. The reason for that was the sleep apnea. There were some problems with being on that floor, however. The main problem was that the nurses that were stationed there normally worked with people with heart conditions and they really didn't know how to deal with hysterectomy patients. That became evident the first night when one of the nurses leaned on the incision on my abdomen when she reached across me to grab something. Ouch!

To perform a hysterectomy, a surgeon normally makes a horizontal incision in the lower abdomen, then uses stitches to close it. My surgeon had to do it differently. Because of my panniculus and the way the weight of my abdomen had pulled my skin down for years, the easiest way for the surgeon to gain access to my uterus was through a vertical incision that started at my belly button and went up about five inches. The location and direction of the incision created problems as far as keeping the incision from pulling open during any kind of movement. So, I had to wear an elastic binder around my abdomen for several weeks until the stitches could be removed. And, the surgeon felt that stitches were not going to be enough to hold it closed. So, I was held together with 25 staples as well.

While being assisted out of bed the first night so that I could take a walk as the surgeon had instructed, I had some trouble standing. There was definitely something wrong and it didn't have anything to do with my incision. As it turned out, someone, in their great wisdom, decided to put a size large binder on me. Unfortunately, I was much larger than a size large. I was being squeezed so much by that binder that I couldn't stand straight. After a discussion with the nurse, we determined that I definitely needed a larger one. She left for a moment and came back with

an extra-large. However, that was still too small. But, that was the largest one they had in stock. It was humiliating and more than a little disconcerting. Even though I had dropped a significant amount of weight, I was still too big to use the necessary medical supplies. Just like I did for the past 20 years, I came up with a plan that addressed a problem few have to deal with. I convinced the nurse to bring a second extra-large binder. We Velcro'd the two together so that it was twice the size. That worked, but I was embarrassed.

Another problem that presented itself was that the surgeon was not able to get to my lymph nodes because of the fat, so he was unable to check them for cancer cells. We just had to assume that the cancer was contained in the uterus and had not spread to the lymph nodes. It kind of gives me an uneasy feeling, even today, to realize that we just never found out for sure.

Once I recovered from the hysterectomy, I was feeling much better than I had in many years. The 60 pounds I had lost was a small amount in comparison with how much overweight I was, but I had more energy and could do more things than I could six months previous. I got what I wanted, a safe, successful surgery, but something inside me wasn't satisfied. I wanted more. It was like a switch had been flipped. I wanted to continue with my healthy eating and exercising to see if I could drop even more weight. I set my sights on losing 40 more pounds. That would make a total of 100. I didn't know anybody who had lost that much weight. If I reached that mark, I figured I would be "living the dream." I would be satisfied. I already had a good start. I just had to continue doing what I had been doing.

The diet and exercise were the easy part at this point. The hard part was going to be convincing myself that it was okay to continue to be selfish and put my needs and wants over those of others. It was acceptable when I was fighting cancer, but once I won that battle, I had a hard time justifying continuing to put myself first, something I knew I was going to have to do to get to that 100-pounds lost milestone.

Once I was recovered enough from the surgery to start up my walking again, I started pushing myself. After a couple weeks, I was up to about 2.25 miles a day. My breathing was so much better. My health had greatly improved and for the first time in my life I felt I was going to be successful in losing weight and keeping it off. There wasn't going to be any turning back this time.

The fitter I got, the more I realized that I needed something more than just walking, so I joined a

women-only circuit training facility. I had a membership at one of their locations in California before I moved to Arizona. I knew how to use their machines and I knew I would receive some support from the staff there.

I worked out there faithfully three days a week and continued to walk at least 30 minutes a day, every day...no excuses. At the beginning, I enjoyed working out at that facility. I felt comfortable there as there were many other members that also had weight issues. The fact that it was a women-only facility made me a lot less self-conscious than I would have been at a regular gym. There came a time, however, when I looked around the room and saw that people weren't really putting much effort into their workout. There was a lot of socializing and gossiping. I often had to wait for the person at the station in front of me to move on to the next station because she was busy chatting and didn't hear the instructions on the tape to change stations. It was at that point that I realized that I needed something more. The athlete I used to be was starting to resurface and this lollygagging was just not acceptable anymore, so I went in search of something to bump up my fitness level even more.

10

While I was looking for a different place to work out, I came to the conclusion that just walking around the neighborhood wasn't satisfying me either. So, five months after my hysterectomy, I signed up for a 5k (3.1 miles) charity walk/run called "Outrun the FBI." It was the longest distance I had attempted to walk to that point. And, while this was actually a timed event, people who weren't runners were encouraged to just walk and enjoy the company of others. It was, after all, a fundraiser and the more people they could get to enter, the more money was raised. I felt that just getting out there and walking with hundreds of other people would make me feel a little more normal.

By this time, I was down 80 pounds. I didn't walk alone. My sisters, Radine and Terri, and one of my friends from work all walked with me. I finished in 1 hour and 5 minutes, a 21:00 pace. Not surprisingly, I finished dead last, a full five minutes behind the previous finishers. And, sadly, our group crossed the finish line to the sound of silence. There was nobody there to cheer us as we crossed. Even the course workers had left to go listen to the band that was playing for the competitors. That really surprised me because they knew we were coming. Each time we passed a course official at a checkpoint, they would radio ahead and tell the organizers that the last four had passed their checkpoint. Fortunately, it was a chip-timed event so at least they knew we finished. We laughed about it then, but when I think about it now, it is kind of disappointing. It didn't make sense to me that there wouldn't be at least a few people waiting at the finish to congratulate us.

That event was actually the first time I knew that somebody in my family was proud of me. As we walked past a course official, Terri told him that I had dropped 80 pounds. That floored me.

The course official was clapping for us as we walked past. I am sure he saw that it was difficult for me to be walking that distance, pushing all of that fat around in front of me. But, the fact that Terri had just told a complete stranger about my accomplishment meant a lot to me. It made me realize that the important people in my life understood how hard I had been working and were rooting for me.

Three months later, I took on another challenge. I entered the Lost Dutchman Days 2-mile fun run in Apache Junction, Arizona, with the intention of actually running at least part of it. I hadn't been doing any running at all. I just figured maybe I would force myself to run just 30 seconds, just one little burst during those two miles so I could honestly say that I ran in a 2-mile race. There were so many people registered for it that nobody would even notice my massive body bouncing around. As the race started, I figured there was no time like the present to do my short run, so I started off in a little trot. That spurt didn't last long, but at least I did it. I got it over with early and thought I would just walk the rest. However, Terri, who had joined me in this race too, picked out a lady in front of us who had been going our pace for most of the race, but had remained a little ahead of us. Terri told me that my goal was to cross the finish line before that lady. My competitive nature that had been buried under fat for 20 years came out just long enough to force me to run a few more short spurts, including one at the finish line. I actually finished the race two seconds ahead of that lady, which made me feel awesome. I beat my opponent. When I looked at the final results online later, I saw there were actually 53 women who finished behind me. Admittedly, a lot of them walked the entire distance, but for me, it was a major moment. I finished with a time of 34:37 for a pace of 17:18, quite an improvement over my last pace.

During the time I was losing the weight, I enjoyed watching a television show called Big Medicine. It was about people who had gastric bypass surgery and how it changed their lives. I really wasn't interested in the part about the gastric bypass. I think the idea of gastric bypass or lap band surgery is scary. There is so much that can go wrong. What I was interested in was what happened to these people after they dropped the weight. Many of them ended up having plastic surgery to remove the loose skin they were left with.

Because of that show, I decided to go see a plastic surgeon for a consultation. By that time, I had dropped a little over 100 pounds. I was starting to believe that I might actually be able to drop a lot more weight and when I did, I knew there was going to be a lot of extra skin. So to give myself a goal to work toward, I decided to see how much more weight I would need to lose before I could even consider having skin removal surgery. My primary concern was the panniculus. That was not going to disappear no matter how much I worked out. I asked the staff at my oncologist's office if they could recommend a plastic surgeon. They gave me the name of a doctor they had dealt with before. So, I called and arranged for a consultation.

Actually, I made consultation appointments with two different plastic surgeons, the one my oncologist recommended and one I found while doing research on the internet. I wanted to get a second opinion in case one tried to talk me into it just for his own profit and not because it was something that would benefit me. I ended up making both appointments for the same day. However, the doctor I was going to use as my second opinion had an opening earlier in the day. On the way into his office, my mother, who had come along for support, tripped and fell on the sidewalk. Fortunately, there was an urgent care right next door to the plastic surgeon's office. So,

we checked her in there and I walked next door to my appointment. The doctor at the urgent care ultimately suggested I take my mother for a CT scan to make sure she didn't have any serious injuries related to her fall. So, I called and cancelled the other appointment. As it turned out, I didn't need that other appointment anyway. I was so impressed with the first plastic surgeon that I knew that I wanted him to do the work if and when I decided it was time.

Before I even met with the surgeon, I experienced yet another size-related issue. One of his assistants came into the examining room and opened a closet to pull out a robe for me to put on after I had removed my clothes for the examination. She handed me an extra-large robe. It didn't fit. She had to go to another room to get a larger one. That was kind of like a slap in the face. Even though I had dropped a lot of weight, here was yet another doctor having to find a way to accommodate my size. When he entered the room, I showed him what I was saddled with. He almost immediately said, "That needs to come off." Wow! That shocked me. I didn't have any idea that I was anywhere close to a weight where I would be considered a candidate for surgery. I was thinking I would have to lose another 75-100 pounds. He explained that he could remove the panniculus, but that there was still too much thickness in the wall of my abdomen to do anything about that yet. He said the panniculectomy would make it easier for me to move around and I would be able to maximize my workouts by being able to move more freely. He did warn me, however, that there was an 85-90 percent chance of complications with this surgery. He assured me that he could handle the complications as they arose. He just wanted to warn me ahead of time.

When I left his office, the doctor said he would have his staff contact my insurance company to get the required authorization. I was excited about the prospect of having the surgery done. When I originally scheduled the appointment, I was thinking it would be sometime down the

line, perhaps a year or two, but when he said that he could do it now, I allowed myself to get excited. I saw this as the first step to truly living a “normal” life.

There were a couple of things that both amazed and amused me about the surgery. The first is that it was performed as an outpatient surgery. I was in surgery for about three hours, in recovery for an hour and then sent home and told to come back in two days for a checkup. How can you remove a part of a person’s body and send them home an hour later? That is more than my mind can comprehend, even to this day.

The second thing was that I actually walked myself into the operating room and climbed up onto the operating table. That was really an strange feeling. Here I was, just sauntering into a sterile room, basically saying to the staff, “Okay, go ahead and remove a huge chunk of my body. I won’t mind.” In my previous two procedures, the D&C and the hysterectomy, I was wheeled down the hall on a table and was knocked out before I reached the operating room. But being completely aware of everything, including the shiny, sharp surgical instruments, can be more than a little unsettling.

As I woke up from that surgery, I really wanted to look at my new body. Knowing that wasn’t possible, I decided to feel for it. So I ran my hand down my abdomen. I was struck with a feeling of joy as I was actually able to feel my hipbone area. It was swollen and tightly bound with an elastic binder, but I haven’t been aware of my hips in more years than I can remember. All of that fat had been covering it. It felt amazing. I had been given back something that was taken from me in my 20’s. I knew that was going to be the start of a new chapter in my life.

Rather than go home afterward, which conservatively would have taken about an hour and a half and would have had me jostling around too much in the car, I opted to stay at a hotel near the

surgeon's office until my checkup two days later just in case there were any problems. I had after all, been warned about the high probability of complications. I had chosen that particular hotel because they had pillow top mattresses and I figured I was going to be spending a lot of time in that bed so I might as well be comfortable. As it turned out, I didn't even sleep in the bed. It was too tall for me to get into without pulling on the hundreds of stitches that were holding together the incision that ran horizontally from one hip to the other. I even tried putting a couple phone books on the floor to use as steps. That didn't work. So, I slept sitting up in the armchair. I don't know how much sleep I actually got anyway. I think I slept for 30 minutes at a time, then got up to walk. Like with the hysterectomy, I was told that the more walking I did, the faster I would heal. That actually worked out well for me because I wanted to walk so that I could go into the bedroom to look at my body in the mirror. On my first trip into the bedroom, I cautiously approached the mirror and placed myself in front of it. I didn't actually look into it until I had collected my thoughts. I took a deep breath, faced the mirror and experienced my big reveal. What I saw took my breath away. If I had been able to jump up and down, I would have. I now had thighs. It had been a lot of years since I had seen my thighs. They were hidden by the panniculus. I was really only aware of them all those years because I sweat so much from the skin rubbing against them. My thighs frequently had rashes on them because there was there was constant skin-to-skin contact, especially when I was seated. You can't imagine how exciting it was for me to have legs again. I kept walking and walking, from the armchair to the bedroom mirror, back and forth, over and over and over again...all night long. I don't know if I can adequately express what I felt that evening other than to say that I was happy with something about my body for the first time in many years.

I recovered quickly from that surgery, much more quickly than the surgeon anticipated. As a

matter of fact, I think I shocked him. He walked into the examining room when I went in for a follow-up visit about nine days after the procedure and had a big grin on his face. He asked, "Do you know why I am smiling?" I was thinking about replying, "Because you saw me naked?" But, I resisted. He then told me that he was smiling because he *knew* I was going have complications, but I surprised him because I didn't have any. That made me smile too.

12

About six weeks after the surgery, I was ready to get back to working out. I went back to the women's circuit training gym, but found that it still wasn't challenging enough. Actually, it was kind of limiting. I had signed up for their program where you put a scan tag into a slot on each machine that registered how hard you were working and kept a record of your progress for you to view later on the computer. One of the built-in functions of the system was that if one of the two machines on the circuit that measured your heart rate determined that it was too high, it would put some kind of digital note on your card so that when you put it in the next machine, it would lock you out. You would have to wait several seconds before it would allow you to start. How was I going to make any more progress if I kept being forced to slow down? Between that and the fact that I had hit a plateau in my weight loss, I decided it was time to move on. I needed to go someplace where there was a greater variety of equipment and where I felt I could work out harder.

My friend Shauna, whom I hadn't seen in many months, told me that she had joined a full-service gym and was getting great results. She said I should consider going there to check it out. So, she got me a trial pass and I went in to take a tour of the facility. I immediately decided that was the place for me. There was an abundance of cardio equipment, free weights, a pool, classes and trainers. The staff there was amazing. They were friendly, encouraging and were willing to answer any questions I had. Little did I know when I signed my name on the membership contract that I would meet people who would end up forever changing my life, not just in my physical health, but everything that makes me who I am.

For the first couple months at the gym I basically relegated myself to the cardio equipment and a few of the weight machines - only those that I felt were idiot-proof. I did the best I could with what little

knowledge I had of gym equipment. I would often find myself looking around while I was on the treadmill trying to see what other people were doing. I rarely got brave enough to attempt something other than cardio, but when I did, I felt very much out of place. Fortunately, help was about to arrive.

I was on the elliptical one evening when I sensed somebody approaching from the side. I looked up and saw that it was one of the trainers. His name tag identified him as Joseph. He was a tall, handsome, muscular black man with a big grin on his face. I don't recall having ever seen him before, but then I didn't pay much attention to the staff members. I was too busy watching the time and distance displays on my equipment or watching other members to see if I could pick up any tips from what they were doing. I didn't make eye contact when he approached, not even when he started speaking. I assumed he was speaking to the lady next to me. She did not respond, yet he kept talking. I looked over at her and saw that she was wearing headphones and was ignoring him. I glanced up at him to see if he realized that she wasn't able to hear him and met with his caring gaze. Apparently, it was me he had actually come over to talk to. Once he had my attention he began asking questions, starting with the basics, like how I was doing, how I liked the gym, etc., and progressing to things like what my fitness goals were. There was something about Joseph that just made me want share that information freely with him. He seemed genuinely interested. The more I talked, the more he dug into my story. I told him about the five-month plateau I was currently on and the great frustration that it caused me.

I was naive about how a regular gym operated. I didn't realize that trainers will often approach gym members and try to recruit them as clients. That is how they increased their numbers, which management likes. So, in my mind, I was thinking that Joseph was probably between clients and was just being friendly. He kept digging deeper and deeper into my story until I had pretty much told him everything about me. It was kind of nice to be getting that kind of attention. It was nice that someone

was showing an interest in who I was and who I wanted to be. What I realize now is that he was basically throwing his figurative lasso around me and was getting ready to pull it tight.

All it took was one more question for the lasso to tighten. That question was, "how would you like to come to my boot camp this Sunday?" Was he kidding me? He seriously just invited me to take his boot camp? Did he realize who he was talking to? I must have had that deer-in-the-headlights look. I am pretty sure he sensed my panic. As a matter of fact, it surprised me so much that I could no longer concentrate on my elliptical workout and stopped pedaling. He quickly explained that if there was anything I could not do, he would help me. He could change up any exercise so that a person at any fitness level could do it, or at least a version of it. And, he would let me try the boot camp out for free. SOLD! What did I have to lose?

I often wondered what made Joseph approach me that day. In a later conversation he explained that he had seen me come in four nights in a row and that each time I came in I worked hard, but just stuck with the cardio machines. He figured I was someone who could benefit from some guidance. So, while he did come over to talk to me about training, it wasn't just for the sake of recruiting yet another member to make management happy. He really wanted to help me. And help me he did.

A couple days prior to that boot camp I thought I would do a little physical test on myself. I failed miserably. I just knew there had to be pushups in a boot camp so I got down on the floor to see if I could do a pushup...just one. Sadly, but not surprisingly, I couldn't do it. As a matter of fact, I couldn't even hold the pushup position for three seconds. Any confidence I had built since I started losing weight just flew out the door. I felt totally inadequate. I considered backing out and not show up for the boot camp, but I felt that if anybody could help me it was this man who listened to my successes and my struggles, then reached out with an invitation to help. I just hoped he was up for

the challenge.

I showed up for the boot camp not knowing what to expect and not at all confident I had made the right decision. I was actually scared. But, I had made a commitment and I was going to see it through. So I took my place on a mat next to the others and got ready to work.

It was at that first boot camp that I met Danielle, someone who would later become a mentor. When I saw her I was immediately envious and not entirely sure I liked her. I am sure that was jealousy. Here I was, new to any kind of organized workout and questioning whether I was going to be able to make it through the class, and in walks this woman in her mid 20's who appeared to be much stronger than anyone else in the class. She was wearing baggy shorts, a tight tank top and shoes that matched her outfit. She was loud and outgoing and carried herself with a confidence I wish I had. There were perhaps five or six others in attendance. We were all at different levels. At least four appeared to me as if they didn't need any help physically. I was okay with that. I figured it would be motivation for me. But the presence of Danielle was different. It was intimidating. It magnified my lack of fitness. I didn't know who Danielle was. All I knew was that she knew her way around a gym and she was a friend of Joseph.

The boot camp began and I gave it my all. Once in a while I would glance over at Danielle and saw how easily she was doing the same thing I was struggling mightily with. Of course Joseph made her use heavier weights than the rest of us, but she made even that look effortless. While I originally thought that would make me feel like this boot camp was way over my head, it actually motivated me. I thought it would be nice to be just half as strong as she was. I found out later that Danielle was the general manager at the gym and, as I will discuss later, she assumed a much bigger role in my life.

I put a lot of effort into that boot camp. I might not have measured up to the others in the class physically, but I bet I surpassed them in effort. Joseph modified most of the exercises so that I could do them. For example, while the others were doing crunches on the floor, I was doing mine on a stability ball. I tried to do them on the floor, but all I managed to do was raise my head a little. I had absolutely no strength in my abs. He also had us run around the inside of the gym. Running was something I hadn't done since high school, and even then I disliked it. Just running one lap around took a lot out of me. By the end of the class, I was completely exhausted. That was the hardest thing I had done physically in about 20 years. It doesn't seem like much now, but considering where I started, it was monumental. I was proud of myself for not quitting.

Joseph's goal for that first boot camp was to make me believe that I could actually do the things the others were doing, even if I was doing a modified version. He knew he was going to have to get inside my head. He told me that at one point during that first boot camp, he saw the lights go on inside my head. So at the end of class, he offered to set up an appointment for me to talk about training. I knew it was expensive, but I thought that if I felt that good about myself and what I had accomplished after one class, imagine what I would feel like with some one-on-one guidance. So, I went ahead and schedule a time to meet with him.

Shauna came with me to that meeting. She was considering signing up for training again and we thought it might be fun to do it together. Joseph greeted us with a big, knowing grin. It was almost as if he knew it wasn't going to take much to convince us. We sat down and discussed training and cost. The more Joseph spoke, the more I wanted to do it. He even showed me a photo of himself when he was much heavier, something like 130 pounds heavier. It made me trust his ability that much more. If he could do that for himself, I knew he would be able to help me. But the cost was somewhat prohibitive. I wasn't making much money at my job and really didn't have a lot to spare.

So when Joseph said he could indeed train Shauna and me at the same time and we could split the cost, I was excited. I told him I had to think about it and would let him know. So I went home and tried to figure out how I could work it into my budget.

I had finally worked it out and was ready to make the commitment when Shauna decided she couldn't afford it. I didn't see how I would be able to swing it financially paying the full price, so the next time I went into the gym I found Joseph and told him that Shauna had backed out and I wouldn't be able to sign up for the training. Joseph understood but explained to me that I couldn't let other people's situation interfere with what I wanted for me. I needed to start concentrating on me and my goals and if there was any way I could swing it financially, I wouldn't be disappointed with the results. He reworked his offer by throwing in a couple of free sessions. Add in the Sunday boot camp, which he didn't charge his clients for, and it was an offer I couldn't refuse. I figured I would charge it to my credit card and worry about paying for it later. I wanted the feeling of accomplishment I had after the boot camp. So I signed over the payment and put my trust in this man whom I had just met a few days previously, yet who seems to know me so well.

We started with the basic lunges, crunches, some work with dumbbells and an exercise I hated to love - pike flies. I wobbled all over the place while doing lunges, I had to do crunches on a ball because I couldn't manage even one on the floor, my work with the dumbbells had my arms extremely sore and I felt foolish trying to do pike flies. I was a mess. But each time I came in, I made a little bit of progress. And every time I left a training session, Joseph told me I was amazing. I knew he was just trying to make me feel good, but I liked hearing it. It kept me going. I worked with Joseph for 30 minutes two times a week. After our sessions I would walk on the treadmill for about 30 minutes. Well, sometimes it was only 15 minutes, but I was doing the best I could. The other five days of the week, I either did cardio or did Joseph's workouts on my own. I was in the gym seven

days a week. I was determined to get off my plateau.

Joseph only weighed me once and that was just so that he had a baseline measurement. He never even hinted at weighing me again. I watched as other trainers weighed their clients on a regular basis, but I never even went near the scale at the gym. Joseph knew that if he weighed me, I would worry too much about having to meet his expectations and it would hurt me mentally. He tried to take my focus off the numbers on the scale by asking me to focus on how I felt, how much I was improving physically and how much better my clothes were fitting. Scale addiction is no fun. It is extremely draining. Watching the numbers on a scale can be a source of motivation when they are going down, but during a plateau or, worse yet, if the numbers start to rise, it can suck the life out of you and can bring you down.

Even though Joseph wasn't weighing me, I was weighing myself...a lot. I got caught up in the scale addiction he was trying to save me from. I had developed a need to constantly monitor my weight. My plateau had me feeling like I no longer had control. It made me feel powerless. I felt that if I knew what I weighed at all times, I could figure out what I was doing wrong and make adjustments so the weight to start dropping again. It got so bad that I was getting on the scale several times a day, sometimes five or six times a day. I would make up excuses to go into the bathroom so that I could check my weight: I had to brush my teeth; I needed to get an emery board; I thought I left the light on.

I finally shared that information with Joseph and he convinced me to bring my scale to him. As soon as I handed it to him, he went out to the parking lot, threw it high in the air and watched it shatter. It was one of the most liberating moments I have had. I felt a huge weight (no pun intended) lifted off my shoulders. I actually had a second scale at home, so the destruction of the scale I brought him

was purely symbolic, but it worked. I went quite a while without feeling the need to monitor my weight that closely. As a way to emphasize the insignificance of the number on the scale Joseph explained to me that when somebody sees a “before” picture of me, they don’t know what the number was on the scale at that point. When they see an “after” photo, they don’t know what the number on the scale was. It doesn’t matter. What matters is what they see - the change in size. A number is just a number.

Joseph was very patient with me. I had been keeping him updated on the fact that my weight was not going down. I had to admit to him that I had gotten back to weighing myself. Every so often, he would ask me if I was ready for his nutrition plan. I kept refusing. Each time he brought it up I told him that I had lost 125 pounds on my own and that I just needed him to get me headed in the right direction physically. I wanted to be able to say that I lost the weight on my own. However, after about three months of training, I was gaining strength and flexibility but the weight remained the same. That put my plateau at a very long, frustrating eight months. I finally had to admit that I needed help. I only had two weeks left to work with Joseph and I knew I wasn’t going to be able to afford more training so I decided to ask him for help. I really didn’t want to do that. I felt like I had failed, but I also didn’t want to keep spinning my wheels. I knew I could lose more weight and I wasn’t ready to give up. When I finally asked him for assistance I think he secretly rejoiced. Having lost a lot of weight himself, Joseph understood that he had to wait until I was ready to commit to a new eating plan. If I wasn’t ready, I wouldn’t be successful and that could have a devastating effect on me.

After just one day on the new nutrition plan, I dropped three pounds, six pounds in the first week. The main difference in that plan and the way I had been eating was the number of times a day I had to eat. On my own plan, I ate three meals a day and never snacked. Joseph had me eating five

smaller meals a day. The food was basically the same, just spread out more through the day in order to keep my metabolism high. A trainer once explained this theory to me by relating a person's metabolism to a campfire. If you have just three large logs to put on the campfire for the day, in order for it to last all day you need to wait for the fire to die down almost completely before putting a new log on. The fire won't burn very hot. As a matter of fact, it will smolder for a good part of the day. However, if you have five smaller logs (meals) to feed the fire throughout the day, you can keep it burning hotter because you are feeding it more frequently.

13

Even though I wasn't training with him anymore, I frequently saw Joseph at the gym and would talk to him about issues I was having. He was like a father figure to me. He was wise beyond his years, seemed to understand me like a family member should and was always incredibly supportive. He played the role I expected my father to be playing at that point in my life so you can imagine the overwhelming sense of abandonment I felt when he called me to tell me that he ended his employment with that gym and was moving to a city about 45 miles away. It might as well have been another state. He had some very valid reasons for leaving and I think I think he made the right decision, but it was a very hard thing for me to deal with. And just like when my father passed when I was a teen, there was suddenly a huge hole in my life.

Joseph's departure was so upsetting to me that I found myself standing in front of the refrigerator with the door wide open, looking for something to eat that would make me feel better. I was appalled at myself when I realized what I was doing. I had not yet come to terms with the fact that I was an emotional eater. What did I expect to find on those frigid shelves that would make things better? How would eating anything change the situation? It wouldn't. But there I was, reaching in and grabbing food to shove in my mouth with the hope that it would fill the void. It didn't. As a matter of fact, it made me feel worse. The fact that what I ended up eating was only grapes, a healthy food, was insignificant. What was disturbing was that I had turned to the enemy for comfort. That was unacceptable and I vowed never to let that happen again.

Shortly after Joseph left, I reached a milestone. I finally got into a size large shirt. That is something I had only dreamed about and didn't really think was a possibility since I had been wearing 4X shirts and had to stretch them order for them to fit. I wanted so badly to share that accomplishment with

the person who I knew would appreciate it the most. What should have been a happy moment was instead bittersweet. I did share that triumph with friends and family members but I don't think they really understood how meaningful it was to me. Joseph would have beamed with pride and would have told me I was amazing.

14

One of the staff members at the gym who had been following my progress, knew that I no longer had a personal trainer and suggested I sign up for the gym's new boot camp program. I enjoyed Joseph's boot camp so I agreed to give it a try. Besides, I was told that if I didn't like it, I could cancel within 30 days and not be charged. What did I have to lose?

Fortunately for me, a trainer named Kimberly was the director of the boot camp program for all four of the company's gyms. She worked out of another location so I didn't know who she was at that point, but what she designed in that program was just what I needed at that time. All of the members of that class became part of a team. We showed up, worked our butts off, supported and encouragement each other and celebrated each other's accomplishments. It wasn't like the gym's other classes where people showed up, did the work, then went their separate ways. This group was designed to help people succeed by not just providing physical exercise, but also incorporate teamwork and a sense of family. This was exactly what I needed.

The coach of the basic class was JR, a tall, good-looking, quiet trainer who had befriended me and had become part of my support system. JR didn't have a lot to say, but what he did say was valuable. I trusted JR. He was a friend of Joseph and he knew my story. Anytime he saw me working on my own in the gym he would come over and give me some words of encouragement. I knew I would be in good hands with JR leading the classes. I needed those good hands the first time I attended that boot camp. One of the things we were supposed to do was a box jump. That required jumping with both feet and landing on top of a raised platform. I had come from a point in my life where my feet never left the ground at the same time, so jumping up on a platform and expecting my legs to hold me up when I landed was more than my brain could handle. It scared me. Not only had I not jumped

in years, but I used to get cramps in my calves just standing on my toes to reach something. I was not at all confident that I would be able to do it. While I think the platform was just eight inches off the ground, it might as well have been 80. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to get my feet high enough off the ground to even attempt a safe landing. It seemed like an impossible task. JR saw the apprehension in my eyes and told me that I could just step up then step back down until I was ready to try jumping. I told him I didn't want to do that. That would be failing before I even tried. I really wanted to conquer this and he was determined to help so he came over and held out both of his hands for me to hold onto while I jumped. I knew he wouldn't let me fall, so I jumped. I am sure he saw the pride (and the tear) in my eyes when I did. The other members in the class were jumping up and down effortlessly. It took me the entire time allotted for that exercise to do that one jump, but I did it. JR told me that next time I should try for three jumps. Forget that. My confidence took off from there, so during the next class I just kept jumping until we were told to stop. It was only 45 seconds, but for me it was a long time and I was proud of myself.

With my confidence increasing, I decided to tackle the one thing I really struggled with... running. Up to that point I had been satisfied with just finishing races...walk, run or crawl. Somewhere in the back of my mind was a little voice telling me that I should kick it up a notch so on the eve of my 44th birthday I went into the gym with the sole purpose of running a mile on the treadmill. That was a lofty goal for me. I don't think I have ever run a mile, not even as an athlete in high school, so this truly was going to be a challenge.

Fortunately, Danielle, the general manger of the gym who had been taking Joseph's boot camp with me, had been working toward getting me more comfortable with running, whether I wanted her to or not. Something that became a tradition was her sneaking up behind me while I was walking on the treadmill and pushing the controls to increase the speed. It didn't matter what speed I had it set on. She would tell me that she didn't think I was working hard enough and made me go faster. I tried to fool her once by starting off at a slower speed than usual. That way, when she increased the speed, it would be at the speed I was comfortable with. My plan backfired. She figured out what I had done and adjusted the treadmill to faster than where she normally set it. It actually had me at a very slow run. She told me to run at those settings until the display read a certain time, then I was to walk for an additional 30 minutes. She just walked back to her desk and expected me to follow her instructions. I am pretty sure that was when I used the first swear word I had used in years. At one point she looked over to make sure I was still running. I was, but I am sure she could tell I was thinking about slowing it down so she yelled across the gym, "Don't make me come over there." She didn't have to come over. I finished the amount of time she requested and I felt extremely proud of myself for pushing through the exhaustion. The funny thing is that the amount of time she wanted

me to run was only four minutes, but for a non-runner it felt like an hour.

I entered the gym the night I was going to try to run a mile and got myself settled on a treadmill. I set it on the same speed at which Danielle had me run that four minutes. Admittedly, it was a very slow speed (4.4 miles per hour), but it had me at a slow trot. About three minutes into my run I began to have doubts. I realized that it was going to take me about another 10 minutes to finish a mile and I was already feeling tired. The only other running I had done was in the boot camp at the gym which was usually one .25 mile lap around the outside of the strip mall the gym was in. During those runs I would run a little then walk a little. I never ran the entire lap. But I was not going to give up that night. I had set a goal and if I backed out, I was going to kick myself later. I plugged along slowly but surely. It was hard, very hard, but I finally did it. I ran for more than 13 minutes. That was one of the biggest moments of my life. I didn't give up on myself despite the tiredness and despite the pain. Yes there was pain. My feet and legs hurt a lot. However, that pain was a small price to pay for exuberance I felt. I got off the treadmill and limped over to the office where Danielle and JR were having a conversation with some other employees. I stuck my head in the office and told them what I had done. I got high fives and hugs for my accomplishment, not just from Danielle and JR, but also from the other employees who I didn't even know. My parting words were, "I am never going to do that again." Danielle just smiled and nodded. I think she knew better.

About a week later, I decided to try 1.5 miles. I succeeded at that and went in and shared that accomplishment with Danielle. Again I told her that I was not going to run anymore. Again she smiled and shook her head. She knew that she was getting to me.

Shortly after conquering that 1.5-mile run, my sister Terri told me about the Not Your Average Joe 10k run she was entering as a training run for a half marathon. It was going to be held the following

month. As soon as she told me the premise of the race I agreed to do it with her. The race had a superhero theme in honor of an emergency room doctor who was hit by a car and killed while running in Phoenix. The runners in the race were encouraged to dress up in a superhero costume. It sounded like fun. I had never even walked 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) before, but how serious could the race be when you were supposed to wear a super-hero costume?

When I made the commitment to run in that race, I told JR about it. I expected him to be shocked or at least to think I was joking. I had been telling all of the boot camp coaches over and over that I was not a runner and that I didn't like to run. Instead of being shocked, JR was incredibly supportive. He gave me what was probably the most valuable piece of advice I could have received - "Run Lisa's race. Don't worry about what everybody else is doing." He explained that everyone would be running at different paces, many of them much faster than mine. I should not worry about what everybody else was doing, just run my race. My race was finishing, whether it was running or walking. It was good advice. I carried that advice with me, not just in the race, but also through the rest of my weight loss journey. I decided not to worry about how fast others were dropping weight. I just went at my pace and concentrated on finishing.

The race was amazing. I overcame a lot of self-doubt with help from people who weren't even there. As our costumes, Terri and I wore red superhero capes. It wasn't very creative, but we considered ourselves dressed up. I decided to pay tribute to the trainers who had gotten me to that point by writing all of their names on the cape under the title "Sesa's Superheroes" (Sesa is my nickname). Since I had never run more than 1.5 miles, my plan was to try to divide the 6.2 miles by alternating running .75 mile then walking .25 mile. I would be satisfied with that.

Once I started running though, I realized that I was feeling good. I was feeling strong. I kept running

after I reached the point where I was supposed to walk. Before I knew it I had run two miles, then three. At the three-mile marker a light breeze started. I became aware of the flapping of my cape. I thought about all of the names on it, how much effort they had put into getting me to this point and all of the well wishes I received from them in the days before the race. Suddenly, I felt a little lighter and a lot stronger. It was almost as if those people whose names were on the cape were lifting me and carrying me along the course. They had taken over running this race for me.

At about mile four I found myself running alone. There was a group about .25 miles ahead of me and a group about that same distance behind me. There were no spectators either. It would have been a good time to walk if I was going to. Who would know? I seriously thought about it. Being alone, however, gave me an opportunity to concentrate on what was going on inside of me. I thought about everything I had been through. I thought about how far I had surpassed my own expectations in this race. I realized that something special was happening. The Lisa who was still running in this race was not the same person who started it. This Lisa was not a quitter. This Lisa was not going to be satisfied with merely finishing. I liked this Lisa. It was time to say goodbye to an old friend who at times was also an old enemy...the old me. Since I was running alone, I decided to say that goodbye out loud.

At that point the breeze picked up even more. My flapping cape brought my attention back to my back to my progress. It also brought my attention back to the pain I was feeling. My hips, feet and quads all hurt, but the new me just kept on running. I ran every inch of that race. I shouldn't have been able to. I had not trained for it, but I conquered it.

The distance of that race was not the only thing I struggled with. By the time this race took place, I had already had the panniculectomy and had dropped quite a bit of additional weight. That meant

that I had a lot of loose skin hanging over the site of the incision at my lower abdomen. This created an unusual issue. When I ran, the skin would slap against my leg and you could hear it with every step I took. It was pretty loud and was very embarrassing. I had tried to find an undergarment I could wear that might hold me in enough to keep that from happening, but I was unsuccessful. I started hoping that others would think it was the sound of my shoe laces hitting my shoes. Perhaps there would be enough outside noises, such as traffic, to mask the sound. I even thought that if need be, I could try to pound hard enough on the pavement with my shoes to cover it up. About a week before the race however, I had a change in my thinking. I decided that I *wanted* to hear that noise. It would be a reminder to me that I am not the person I was before. It would be like wearing a badge of honor.

After several months of boot camps, I was feeling comfortable with my progress. I decided it was time for me to move from the basic to the regular class. I looked at the schedule and saw that JR would be the coach at the times I could take it. I knew he would help me along if I had trouble with something. After the first class however, I wasn't sure I had made the right decision. I had difficulty with several of the exercises and my cardio level didn't seem to be where I thought it should be. The only thing that kept me from quitting was the knowledge that this was the end of the month and the exercises would be changed the following week for the new month's routine. I thought that maybe when they changed we would be doing things that were easier for me. Then I started hearing some of the gym members and trainers talk about the new class and how hard much harder it would be. That sent my confidence in a downward spiral.

That is when I came up with what I thought was a brilliant idea. I thought maybe I could convince Kimberly to start an intermediate class. I bet she hadn't thought of that. Maybe she wasn't aware there was a need for it. So I sat down to write her an email to explain my situation and tell her of my idea. I struggled a lot with that email. As I typed, I became frustrated with my lack of confidence. I felt like a loser. I hated quitters. I realized that while there are times my confidence is high, there are also times when the old self-doubt creeps in and that frustrated me immensely. I felt I had come too far to be experiencing this kind of doubt. The tears of someone who was giving up on herself started to flow from my eyes. I did everything in my power to try to convince her that an intermediate class was needed. I even told her that my membership in the boot camp program was about to expire and I didn't know if I wanted to continue. Certainly a threat like that would get the desired result.

It took me about an hour to properly word that email. I wanted it to sound very convincing. When it

was completed, a tear fell on my finger I hit the send key. I figured Kimberly would eventually get my message, think it over and maybe look into what I had proposed. But that was not Kimberly's style. No, when she became aware of an issue, she took immediate action.

It couldn't have taken more than five minutes before I received a reply from her. It wasn't anything close to the response I expected or hoped for. Kimberly said I didn't need an intermediate class and that I should continue to take the regular class. She said that she and JR had been discussing my progress and were happy with how far I had come. She said I was "right where I needed to be." And she was pretty adamant about it.

Knowing that Kimberly was behind me and believed in my abilities gave me an incredible lift. It was, after all, her program. So I kept showing up for the regular class and started improving faster than I anticipated. I am really glad she talked me out of quitting because my decision to stick with that program was monumental in my learning to finally believe in myself. Kimberly told me months later that the reason she responded immediately was because she was afraid she was going to lose me. When I found out that she had written that email from a restaurant while she was on a trip, I realized how much she really cared about her clients.

By the time I had been at the gym for a year, I had a nice little support system in place. Joseph, JR, Danielle and Kimberly were all motivating and encouraging me through every step of my journey. They guided, directed, pushed and motivated me to be the best I could be. They had me on the right path and I knew I could go to them for anything. Then one day a new trainer entered the ring and I was about to be challenged on a whole new level. I am pretty sure that he was put into my life to provide me with challenges and he was very successful at that. He challenged me as much mentally as he did physically and it all started with our first encounter. To be honest, though, after our first meeting, I was hoping that I would never see him again.

It was six months into the boot camp program and I was pleased with the progress I had made. I enjoyed going to the gym for these classes. I had everything figured out and under control. I took boot camp on specific nights at specific times so that I could work with the trainers I was familiar with. One trainer was a little easier and expected less than the others so on the days I felt I needed a little break I took it with him. I liked my routine. I could just settle into the class, do the work and keep progressing slowly but surely. That all changed when Andrew appeared.

I went into the gym one night for boot camp and was stretching and talking to some of the other members while we waited for the trainer to arrive. In bounded a new trainer. He seemed much younger than Joseph and JR and had a lot of energy and a lot of enthusiasm. I had never seen him before. He introduced himself as Andrew and said that he was from one of the gym's other locations. He then came up to each of us and asked our names. When I said my first name he asked, "Lisa Wrobel?" I admitted I was and he said that he had heard a lot about me and he was excited that I was in the class. He then explained that he worked with Kimberly and that she had told him about an

email I had sent telling her about the cape I wore in the superhero-themed 10K. By the way he had reacted to my being there, I assume Kimberly had told him about my story and the success I had been having in the program.

When the class started, I was determined to live up to the reputation I apparently had. Andrew worked us hard, harder than any trainer I had taken it with at that point. There were no breaks, the pace was much faster and we did a lot more cardio. It was by far, the hardest workout I had done. By the end of class I was thoroughly drained and more than a little discouraged. I had become comfortable with the other trainers and knew how they ran the program. I knew I could handle their classes. Andrew, however, gave me a serious wakeup call. Maybe I wasn't ready for this level of intensity. I was pretty sure I had failed to live up to his expectations of me. The others in the class seemed to be doing really well with the increased pace. I started to doubt I could keep up with them. I don't like doubting my abilities that much and it was Andrew's method of coaching that made me feel like that. I could feel myself regressing in my confidence. I really didn't like him at all at that point. Who was this young punk to come in and make me feel like that? I wanted to tell him to go back to his own gym and stay there.

After the 20 minute drive home where I went from being disgusted with myself for not being able to handle the class to hating Andrew for showing me my weaknesses, I reflected on what I had accomplished during that class. While I hadn't been able to do as much as the other members, I had pushed myself harder than I ever had. I had worked myself to exhaustion and, believe it or not, it felt good. I realized I was no longer the same person who just a few years previous worked herself to exhaustion just walking to the mailbox...five houses down the street. The round trip to the mailbox is only about 150 steps each way. Yet those 300 or so steps would require so much energy that when I got back to the house I would sit outside the front door long enough to recover before going back

into the house. That Lisa was gone...forever.

I came to the conclusion that Andrew's goal was not to show us what we couldn't do. It was to get us to do more than we thought we could. Our minds often quit on us before our bodies do. He wanted us to work toward being stronger and faster. I realized that I had become satisfied with the level I was at and there is no growth in that. There is little satisfaction in being successful at something that is easy for you and Andrew's class was definitely not easy. Because of that feeling of satisfaction, I had a change of heart. I found myself hoping that he would come and lead the class once in a while, just not too often.

As it turned, Andrew was there the following week too, and the week after that. He had been assigned to that class on a permanent basis. I found myself actually enjoying the challenge and made a point of coming in when he was leading. As a result, as the weeks passed, I saw great improvements in my abilities. My endurance level began to rise significantly. I was once again in my happy place.

Everything was going along rather smoothly until one night I injured myself during boot camp while another trainer was leading and I had to take a week off. The night I was able to return to the class, I was looking forward to getting back down to business with Andrew. When I arrived at the gym however, I was told he wasn't leading the class anymore. As a matter of fact, the others in the class weren't even sure that he still worked for the company. I was stunned. How could he abandon me right when I was hitting my stride? He had become my mentor, my replacement for Joseph. I had become addicted to the intensity of his classes and I appreciated the moral support he gave me. Yet again, somebody I had clung to as a father figure was gone. I felt alone and more than a little lost. Why did people keep abandoning me when I needed them?

It was at that time that I celebrated having reached the 200 pounds lost milestone. And just like when I wanted Joseph to be there when I celebrated fitting into a size large shirt, the person I wanted most to share this victory with was gone. So it was an empty victory, but it was a victory nonetheless.

About a year and a half after joining the gym, things there started to change. Many of the things that were going on just didn't make sense. In a matter of a few of months Joseph, Danielle, Kimberly and Andrew were all "forced" to leave by management. I couldn't pretend that I didn't see it. I understand that there is a fairly large turnover of employees at gyms and that it is often a numbers game - how much training can they sell for the company, were they able to increase membership? But, how did it come to be that almost all of the movement of personnel involved this one group of trainers, those involved with the boot camp program that I had come to rely on...my support system? I looked around the gym and saw many trainers still there whom I had seen sitting around socializing and texting while they were training clients and whom I heard trash-talking the company. The trainers who were leaving were those who worked their butts off. They were quality trainers who really cared about their clients. I had to make a tough decision. I had to decide between continuing to go to a place that had become an integral part of my improved health or standing up for others. Up to this point everything had been about what was in *my* best interest and what was going to keep me moving forward. It was now time to stand up for those who had stood by me and worry about myself later. So I decided to make a statement by leaving that gym. It was a heart-wrenching decision, but it was the right decision.

Before I quit, I decided to send an email to the company expressing my dissatisfaction. I felt it was my right and my duty as someone who had paid in so much money through my upgraded membership and personal training. How would they know how members viewed what was going on unless somebody told them? In the email I told them that I was concerned that they were going to start losing members. As a matter of fact, I had spoken with several of the members who had just

joined the boot camp program who told me they were also thinking about quitting. I stated in the email how it seemed as if just the trainers involved with the boot camp were being targeted and suggested that maybe the problem was not with the trainers, but was with the management instead.

It took four days for someone to return my email and I was disappointed with the response. All I was really asking for was for somebody to send me a reply that said something like, "We are sorry you are unhappy. We appreciate you bringing your concerns to us and we will look into it." I would have been satisfied with an answer like that. Even if they had no plans to actually look into it, they could have told me they would. How would I know? Instead, I got a reply that really sent me over the edge. The lady who replied made a critical error. She left attached at the bottom of the message the email she received from her supervisor, which basically told her how to handle me and said that if she needed help writing the response, she should contact a specific employee because she was "the master at these kinds of emails." It came across to me as if they receive a lot of complaints. The result of all of that was that I felt that I was just being pacified and my concerns weren't being taken seriously.

A couple days later I went into the gym to quit. I was glad I didn't see JR. I didn't think I could face him. I knew that if I saw him, I would break down. I went to the front desk and asked who I needed to talk to about quitting. The man behind the desk told me to wait a minute while he went to get someone. He came back with JR.

JR could tell by the look on my face that this was something that I was very upset about. After I explained the situation, he grabbed the cancellation form, quickly scribbled something on it and pushed it in front of me for me to sign - no questions, no trying to change my mind. I am sure his boss would have expected him to try to talk me into staying, but he did what he knew was best for

me. I quickly signed the form and handed it back to him before it had a chance to sink in that I had nowhere to go to continue my journey. Before I walked out though, I wanted to talk to somebody in management. I wasn't done saying my piece.

The senior vice president was teaching a class at the gym at that time so I decided I would wait for her to finish and see if she would give me a minute of her time. As I was sitting there waiting, I realized just how far I had come. In the past, I never would have had the courage to confront somebody like this. I would have made up some excuse for quitting, something along the lines of my moving out of state. It would have been much easier on me that way, but my support system had never let me down and I was not going to let them down. I wanted somebody to know exactly how I felt.

After talking to the senior vice president and hearing nothing but excuses coming from her, I thanked her for her time and walked out the door. I held it together until I got in my car. That is when reality hit. I was leaving. There was a good chance that once I left the property, I would never again see the only member of my gym support system who was left, JR. Even though I was the one doing the abandoning this time, it didn't hurt any less.

When one door closes another door opens. Little did I know that when I walked out of that gym the night I quit and its door closed behind me for the last time, my journey was going to become a whole lot more interesting. Up to that point, I was mostly concerned with the physical aspect, losing weight and improving my overall fitness. Sure, the trainers I was dealing with were all helping me address some of the mental issues surrounding weight loss, but those were always addressed as they arose, not actually forced to happen so that I could grow as a person. But that is exactly what took place when I hooked up with Alpha Elite Training.

When Kimberly and Andrew left the gym they went into business for themselves and formed Alpha Elite Training. They took their knowledge and enthusiasm for helping people achieve their fitness goals and created something special – a training business that addressed every aspect of fitness, including exercise, personalized nutrition plans, mental and emotional support, and fun. It was a holistic approach to personal training.

The night I quit the gym I went out to my car and sent a text to Kimberly to tell her what I had done. She apparently told Andrew because by the time I got home there was a message from Andrew waiting for me on the computer. He told me he heard I quit and asked me to think about training with him at the studio where he and Kimberly now operated Alpha Elite. It had been several months since I had heard from or seen Andrew. He had enough integrity to not approach me about training with them while I was still a gym member. But now that I quit, he knew I would need somewhere to go. He told me to think about it for a while and get back to him. That was on a Thursday. I waited until Sunday to accept his offer even though I knew Thursday that I was going to accept. I didn't want to appear too anxious. I didn't want him to get a big head.

When I agreed to train with Andrew I had no idea just how much I was going to be challenged by him. I don't mean he was going to challenge me physically. I was used to him doing that. What I mean is I was about to be challenged mentally and emotionally and I was definitely not prepared for that.

Andrew was a hot shot young trainer who was just getting into the business when he was leading the boot camp at the gym. His youthful enthusiasm was one of the things that appealed to me about him. However, that same youthfulness is what made me step back a little when I first started doing personal training with him and not be as open with him about myself, my thoughts and my life as I had been with Joseph. Andrew is 18 years younger than I am. I didn't think he was going to be able to get inside my head and I wasn't entirely sure I trusted him with my innermost thoughts. He had proven his worth as a physical trainer, but I had yet to test him mentally. When I had issues, I went to Joseph, Danielle and JR. I originally formed an image of Andrew as being the kind of trainer who was out to make a name for himself and who had gotten into the business just because he liked the status of being a trainer. I have heard trainers both in the gym and on television talking about how much they enjoy being in charge and making people sweat and hurt. They walk around the gym with a certain swagger, their chests puffed up with an air of superiority. That is the image I originally had of Andrew. I realize now that all of that thinking was not only wrong, but was totally unfair to him.

The physical part of our training sessions was exactly what I expected...hard. As usual, Andrew pushed me to go beyond what I thought I was capable of doing. He would explain a difficult exercise I had never done before and tell me to get going on it. He didn't allow me time to question whether or not I could physically do it. He just said, "Go" and I did it. In the past I might have had doubts that I could do something that required that much physical ability and would have considered it to be

way above my level. I might have let my mind take over and balked at the idea, but I trusted that Andrew knew what he was doing. I knew that if he was confident in my ability to perform that exercise, I could do it. He wouldn't ask me to do something so that he could watch me fail. What purpose would that serve? It certainly wouldn't have helped my self-confidence. As a result, I regularly surprised myself with the strength he showed me that I had. So physically, I knew I was heading in the right direction. The greater challenge, the mental and emotional part, was about to begin.

Once I got comfortable with his one-on-one training style, Andrew started asking questions about me. He began expecting me to delve into my mind and revisit the Lisa I was long ago...my hopes and dreams from before I gained the weight. And then there were the questions that began with "what are you going to do when...?" Some of the questions were things that I hadn't even allowed myself to consider. I was still thinking in "ifs". Andrew spoke in "whens."

Opening yourself up to someone and being vulnerable is hard, especially after having hidden your true feelings for two decades. Andrew had never been where I came from physically so I didn't think he would understand some of the things I struggle with, let alone be able to help. But when I first started training with him, I promised myself I would give him a chance. Giving him a chance included allowing him to be there for me when I needed help with some of the non-physical issues. It all comes down to trusting your trainer. In Andrew's words, "If you don't trust your trainer, it is time to change your trainer." I realized he wasn't asking questions to be nosy or to find out some juicy gossip. He was asking so that he could find out who Lisa was so that he could help me grow as a person. Alpha Elite Training was all about focusing on the whole person.

I expressed to Andrew that there were many opportunities I had passed up because I was so obese.

He decided I needed to revisit my personal goals by having me write a bucket list with 15 items on it. I never really thought about what I would put on a bucket list so it wasn't easy for me to do. If I had written this list three years prior, I would have put down things I knew I could accomplish. There would have been nothing on it that involved any kind of physical activity. Most likely there would have been things that involved going on a trip somewhere or acquiring something. As I started to write my list I discovered just how many things I didn't do because of my weight; how many things that when I was younger I said I wanted to do before I died. Life was passing me by and I had done nothing to enrich it. I put several things on that list that I know are not attainable, at least not yet. By writing down these seemingly unattainable things I am opening myself up for more growth. Even if I never get to check them off my list, just allowing myself to believe that they are possible gives me inner strength.

The following is the bucket list I came up with:

- 1 Take a hot air balloon ride. This is something that I have always wanted to do, but I had read that you have to climb into the basket using foot holes. That would have been difficult for me to do at my previous weight. I am sure somebody would have assisted me, but I didn't want to put myself through that humiliation.
- 2 Hike to the top of Flat Iron. Flat Iron is in the Superstition Mountains in Arizona. It is a difficult five-mile hike that takes most people around five hours to complete the round trip. I attempted it once after I dropped the weight. I quit about .25 mile from the top. It required a lot of scrambling up rocks, which I loved. The problem wasn't going up. The problem was coming back down. Those same rocks that I had to climb up were going to be obstacles on the way back down. I kept picturing myself getting stuck up

there and having to be rescued by a helicopter. For some reason, my confidence was really low that day. I feel that I failed. I let my fears defeat me.

- 3 Sing karaoke. This goal isn't about the singing itself. It is about having the self-confidence to get up and sing in front of people and not caring what they think about me.
- 4 Go kayaking. I accomplished this with my sister. It was the first time I have been out in public in a swimsuit since I was a teenager.
- 5 Earn a black belt (or the equivalent) in one of the martial arts. This is something that has always appealed to me. It requires a lot of self-discipline, which I have now. I know I can achieve this.
- 6 Run a half marathon. I completed this goal as well, as will be discussed later in this book.
- 7 Throw out the first pitch at a Major League Baseball game. This is one of those goals that I am not sure is achievable. It depends on people other than myself to determine if I am worthy of the honor.
- 8 Finish college. I completed three years of a four-year bachelor degree. It haunts me to know that I was that close. Fortunately, with the internet and on-line classes, this goal is definitely attainable.
- 9 Own a new car. I am working on this.
- 10 Read the entire Bible. I started this project, but couldn't find the time to finish it

because I was spending a lot of my spare time writing this book. I will do this once this book is written.

11 Complete a 100-mile bike ride. This is something a physical therapist suggested I concentrate on instead of long-distance running. I still have plans to do this, but haven't set a date or location yet.

12 Take a cruise to Alaska. I chose Alaska because of its beauty and because it didn't require wearing a bathing suit (which would have been horrifying) like a cruise to some tropical location. I still want to do this, but might add the tropical location as well now.

13 Go sky diving. I put this on the list because it looks like a lot of fun and I knew I didn't meet the weight restriction. It is easy to say you would do something that really scares you when you know you can't because you don't qualify. Now that I meet the qualifications, I might have to rethink this.

14 Do a 10-minute plank and 10 pull ups. The longest plank I ever held was just over six minutes. With a little more work, I know I can do this. The pull ups will be more of a challenge. I can't even do one yet. As a matter of fact, I am not even close to being able to do one.

15 Write a book about my weight loss journey in the hopes of inspiring others. Well, here it is.

Sometimes in order to grow as a person, you need to go outside of your comfort zone and do things that do not come naturally for you. Realizing that I was quite reserved and didn't allow myself to do

things because of what others might think about me, Andrew had me yell a specific swear word. He said I could not leave the training studio that night until I did. I do not use swear words. I do not allow them in my vocabulary. And while making me swear might seem uncalled for and unnecessary, he wanted me to realize that the longer I stayed where I was comfortable, the easier it would be for me to stay there and stagnate. As they say, if you keep doing what you have been doing, you will get what you've have always gotten. It took the entire session to get there, but I finally yelled that word. I haven't used it since. Well, that is not entirely true. The only time I use it is around Andrew, but he deserves it.

Even though Kimberly was not officially my trainer, that didn't mean she cared any less. She was keeping an eye on me even when I didn't know it. And she was not afraid to jump in when she saw the need. She once pointed out the fact that I was dangerously close to being exercise bulimic. I hadn't realized it until then, but there were several times when I went running or rode the stationary bike just because I had eaten slightly more than I was allowed on my meal plan. I had mentioned to her at the fitness studio one night that there was one day when I had about two cups of unbuttered popcorn at the movie theater. I hadn't had popcorn in years. I felt so guilty about ingesting those extra carbs that I went home and rode the bike for an hour. Until she pointed it out, I didn't think that was either unusual or harmful. It is.

Andrew saw that as an opportunity to address the fact that I had been eating such a restrictive diet for so long that I developed an unhealthy view of food. It had become my enemy. I hated it for what it had done to me. All of my meals were now carefully planned out and measured. There was no straying from the plan. That plan had served me well during my weight loss. I found comfort in knowing that what I was eating got the real me back. I would even bring my own food to parties and sporting events, if I went at all. It was easier to refuse invitations to go out to a restaurant or to a

party than to worry about if others would be offended by my refusal to eat the food they worked so hard to prepare. It might have seemed to them that their food wasn't good enough for me. I was okay with just eating the same thing day after day by myself.

While I thought that what I was doing was in my best interest, Andrew determined that my obsession with this strict adherence to my meal plan was actually harming my chance of ever having a normal social life. He decided it was time for a cheat meal. I struggled with the idea of having a cheat meal. I have not and do not cheat on anything, especially my diet. I balked at the idea when he brought it up. I told him I even hated the term "cheat meal." To humor me, he temporarily renamed it a "reward meal" and pretty much ordered me to go. He went with me for support and brought Kimberly and some of his other clients.

One of the reasons this was so hard was because I knew a lot of people respected me for being able to stick with my diet for so long. I knew I made my trainers (both past and present) proud with my strict adherence to my diet. I liked that they were pleased with me. They often used me as an example to their other clients. It was like they were saying, "See, this is what you can accomplish if you stick to your meal plan." I felt that if somebody saw me eat anything that wasn't on my meal plan, it would be like I was giving them my permission to cheat on their diet and quit on their goals.

As I was driving to the restaurant, there was a whirlwind of thoughts racing through my mind. Would I have the courage to actually do this or would I back out? By eating this, was I going to feel like I let myself and others down? Should I just turn the car around, call Andrew and tell him that I had car trouble so I couldn't make it? Where were the public restrooms on my route home in case I had stomach trouble from what I was going to eat? Once again, I was in my head, overthinking the whole thing. That is something I sometimes still struggle with.

When I got to the restaurant, I was greeted by a grinning Andrew. I think he was surprised that I actually showed up. We went inside and he suggested that I buy a single patty burger and a small order of fries. He knew I was going to need to take a baby step with this one. Then he said that he was going to pay for my meal. I refused, saying that I had to pay for my own meal so that I would not feel like I was being forced. This had to be something I felt I was ready for and if he paid for it, it meant it was his decision, not mine.

So there I was, sitting across the table from two trainers with a cheeseburger and fries staring at me, hoping someone would tell me this was all just a bad joke and that I really wasn't supposed to eat it. The grease from the fries was permeating the bag they had been served in. It looked disgusting. I could feel my stomach rebelling already. How could this possibly be good for me? The others were all enjoying their food and having a lively conversation. I sat there staring at my food trying to tell myself that it was okay. I envisioned myself eating a few bites, then having to run into the restroom because my stomach wouldn't know what to do with it. And, there was going to be a lot of guilt. I just knew I was going to feel like I had let myself down, that I had just wasted three years of retraining myself to eat healthy. Get out of your head, Lisa. Just do it.

I started with the burger. I wasn't really concerned about that. Yes, there was some cheese and a lot more carbs than I was used to, but I could handle that. It was those damned fries that were haunting me. Just thinking I was going to eat fries made me feel guilty. I waited until nobody was looking, then took a small bite of a French fry...then another. I was actually hoping I wouldn't like the taste of them anymore. That way I could get out of this. Nope. They were amazing. So I ate a couple more. I looked up and nobody was paying any attention to me. They really didn't care that I just blew three years of perfect eating.

I must admit, I enjoyed that meal, even though it was a small burger and I left most of the bun, and I only ate about 10 fries. But it was a big step for me. And to top it all off, I didn't gain any weight from it, nor did I have any intestinal problems. I survived.

Since then, I have had an easier time with it. I allow myself to occasionally have a cheat meal. Yes, I can finally call them cheat meals. I can eat them without feeling guilty and because I go right back to my regular meal plan, I have not gained the weight back. I now actually meet up with friends occasionally for lunch, sometimes an unhealthy lunch.

With that adventure behind me, it was time to address some other issues.

I was used to hearing only positive things from trainers. They encouraged, motivated and cheered me throughout my journey. So when Andrew told me that he had been watching me go downhill mentally for a while, I was astounded. I admired the fact Andrew cared enough about his clients to be brutally honest with them, even at the risk of losing them, but it wasn't supposed to happen to me. I was supposed to be mentally strong. I was supposed to be happy with all that I had achieved. I was supposed to be an inspiration to others. I was not supposed to be told that I might benefit from some therapy. Yet there I was, listening to someone whose opinion I respected tell me that I was walking a dangerous line. It pained me to hear that. I hit a new low that day. At first I resented Andrew for saying that. Then I realized I needed to hear it and I appreciated the fact that Andrew cared enough to address it.

I had been struggling with my self-image and was having a hard time adjusting to the new me, and like I always did in the past, I tried to stuff that emotion. Even though I tried to hide it from others, there were times when I felt like I was not an attractive person and I never would be. Some days I would look at myself in the mirror and be happy with what I saw, but that was compared to what I

used to see. However, when I looked in the mirror and tried to see myself as a 132 pound woman, what I saw appalled me. My focus would immediately go to my abdomen. The loose skin and residual fat hung in such a way that none of my shirts hung properly. The shirts usually fit me nicely at the shoulders and chest, but the part that was around the stomach was pushed out so that it was obvious that I was once fat. I desperately wanted my shirts to hang straight down. If they did I would feel normal and maybe even attractive. Instead, I felt like I was being punished. I felt as though I had worked too hard to still be saddled with what I saw as a grotesque blob of fat. It got so bad that one day when I looked in the mirror, I was actually so disgusted and discouraged that I punched myself in the stomach...twice. That is not the way someone who is of sound mind should act. When I mentioned that to Andrew he immediately halted our training and took me outside for a chat. That is when he brought up the issue of therapy.

While he was addressing all of these issues, Andrew continued to drive me hard in the gym. After about six months of this one-on-one training, I finally had the moment that Andrew had been waiting for me to have. That was the moment when I realized that my weight and my measurements were insignificant. My performance in the gym was the most important thing and if that meant that my weight was five pounds higher than what I would like it to be, that was okay. If the measuring tape showed an extra inch in an area I was trying to reduce, that was okay too. As I built muscle, obviously the measurement there increased and as the muscles get larger, the extra skin was going to shift and resettle elsewhere. That moment was a long time in coming and it took three very intense training sessions to drive it into my head. The first two of those sessions got me close. Both had me sitting on the floor at the end unable to move because I used every bit of energy I had to complete the workouts. But it was that third workout that really drove it home. It was a challenge that most of Andrew's and Kimberly's clients were asked to do during their sessions. They had designed a

challenge that had many different exercises that had to be done in a specific order, some of them many times over. It was to be done in the fastest time possible. I threw my entire being into that challenge. I didn't hold anything back and in the end, I had the best time among all of the clients, men and women, who took the challenge. Many of these clients are 15-20 years younger than I am and had not been through what I have weight-wise. And I did it at a weight that was about eight pounds heavier than I was at my lowest.

Because of those three workouts, I now consider myself to be an athlete. As an athlete, the most important thing is increasing my speed, endurance and strength. Times, distances and the amount of weight that can be lifted, pushed or pulled are the only numbers I need to pay attention to, not a number on the scale. I now look at my journey as a fitness journey, not a weight-loss journey and there is no going back. In Andrew's words, my "car has no reverse."

I have spent a lot of time expressing how much Andrew has helped me and the difference he has made in my life. That is because, while all of the trainers I worked with helped me *take back* my life, Andrew *gave me back* my life. I know that is a strong statement to make, but that is how I truly feel. He was hard on me when he needed to be, soft when he could be, strong when he had to be and understanding all the time. The reason this book was even published was because he kept after me about finishing it. If it wasn't for him, it probably would have remained filed away with all of my other half-completed projects. As I continued to move toward a more normal existence, Andrew was behind me, pushing whatever buttons he could find to get me to succeed. He called me lazy and he called me a machine. He laughed at me when I was not paying attention during a workout and he gave me that "there was never a doubt in my mind" look when I successfully completed a physical challenge that I wasn't sure I could do. I came to believe that everything he had me do, no matter how questionable it seemed, would in some way enhance my life. There is no doubt that Andrew

was and always will be in my corner. I am very lucky to have him there.

The other part of the Alpha Elite team, Kimberly, is equally as important to me. Kimberly is a beautiful woman in both body and soul. She is well-respected, has a passion for helping people and knows who she is. She is the kind of person I aspire to be. While I wasn't training one-on-one with her, she was always watching and was always willing to step in when needed. I had conversations with her in person and through emails where I didn't even realize I was expressing self-doubt. Kimberly caught on right away and quickly jumped in to point out what I was doing and how self-defeating and counterproductive it was. Her insight into people is remarkable. For example, I told her one day that I figured out why I was addicted to the scale. I explained that I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder tendencies and that my obsessively getting on the scale matched some of the other things I was doing, so that had to be the answer. I was excited that I had finally figured it out. Kimberly's response was that that was the easy answer, but it was the wrong answer. She was right. I was grasping at straws. I guess deep down I felt that if I could blame it on a mental disorder, I wouldn't have to accept the reality that I still had not reached the point where I was no longer using a number as measure of my success.

There were times I would arrive a little early at the fitness studio to warm up before my training session. If Kimberly wasn't working with a client, she would invite me to sit down and have a chat with her. I learned a lot during those chats. I mentioned to her once that I considered myself to be a people person and I like to please people. As soon as I said that, she interrupted me and explained that there was a difference between being a people person and wanting to please people. It is great to be a people person, but if you try to please people, you will end up getting stressed out. You will devote so much of your time to trying to please others that you will lose a part of yourself in the process. I have been guilty of trying to please people during this journey. I liked that people were

proud of me and I didn't want to let them down.

Kimberly also confronted me about how I was not being smart in my exercise routine. In my mind, the more work I did, the better. I would just keep going and going. I would often get to a training session 20 minutes early, warm up by running on the treadmill, go through an hour-long workout, then go out the door of the gym and go for a 3-mile walk or run with another client. I figured I was going to make the most of the time I had there. But Kimberly was paying attention and figured it was time to step in. I had just gotten in my car after one of those sessions and was answering a text when she walked up and rapped on the window. When I got out of the car to talk to her, she asked a series of questions; What time did I arrive? How long did I train? What did I do after that? Did I eat something in between my training session and the run? She pointed out that I was taking it too far and if I continued like that, I would burn out. She asked when the last time was that I went for a hike or a bike ride just because I wanted to and not because I needed to burn calories? She pointed out that every activity I did I treated as a workout. Instead, she said, I needed to learn to start having fun again. There was a time in my life when I would go out and do something because I thought it was fun. I needed to get back to that. My life was passing me by just as it had when I didn't participate in things because I was fat, only now it was because I scheduled my life around burning as many calories as possible.

Each time I sat down and spoke with Kimberly, I learned something valuable about nutrition, exercise and even myself. She never missed an opportunity to teach. I learned that I am indeed a strong woman, physically and mentally. I just needed to be reminded of that occasionally.

At the same time I was training at Alpha Elite, I was also taking a boot camp that Danielle started at her apartment complex. Since we weren't in a gym, we didn't have access to the fancy equipment and machines. We didn't need it. Several of us brought whatever fitness equipment we had lying around our houses: stability balls, resistance bands, ankle weights, jump ropes, rope ladders, hurdles, yoga mats, a Bosu ball, etc. Danielle managed to give us an incredible workout with our collection of items. We would meet at her apartment and carry an assortment of these items out to the grass area behind the apartments and get our butts kicked. We occasionally saw people from other apartments standing out on their porches watching us work out and wondered what they thought of the group of women who were tearing up the lawn.

When the temperature rose, Danielle incorporated workouts in the swimming pool. She had to work on me mentally to get me to agree to take the water classes. I have always had a mental image of the people who take water classes as unfit, overweight, older women who need the buoyancy of the water in order to move. I had been trying hard not to consider myself to be one of those people anymore and I felt that taking the water classes would make me feel as if I was back at that place in my life. But, Danielle persisted. She was not going to take no for an answer. She kept asking me if I doubted her ability to give me a good workout in the water. Between Danielle's encouraging me to take the water class and Andrew basically ordering me to do it, I finally gave in. I am glad I did. I found that my muscles really needed the change. They started being stretched out and moved in ways they were not used to and that was a benefit to me.

Taking the water classes was a humbling experience for me. I had become used to excelling in the

land exercises. Most of the others in the boot camp didn't work out anywhere near the amount I did. So I was able to do more and go faster than them. The athlete in me really enjoyed the feeling I got from that. However, not being a great swimmer, I didn't excel in the water. Danielle was patient with me though, and I am pretty sure she secretly enjoyed the fact that I was learning how to handle not being the best.

There weren't many people in this boot camp, so there were days when I was the only one who could make. On those days, Danielle brought me into the gym at her apartment complex and trained me one-on-one. She had me doing things in that gym that I couldn't imagine a person could do. Some of the exercises are things that her trainer had her do that morning. Others were Danielle inventions or things she pulled off YouTube. She called me her guinea pig on more than one occasion. Sometimes I felt as if I was a mini-me for Danielle, like she wanted me to be able to do what she can do. Actually, I am flattered by that. I might not have been able to do the exercises as well as she did, but remember, when I first met her, I thought it would be great to be half as strong as she is. I think I may have finally reached that goal.

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Taking Kimberly's advice, I started looking for some fun active things to do. What I found quickly became my passion. I started running in mud run/obstacle courses. The first one I did was Warrior Dash. It had me doing things I never imagined I would be doing at 44 years old. Warrior Dash, which is nicknamed "the craziest frickin' day of your life", was a 3.4-mile race with twelve obstacles scattered throughout the course. Some of the obstacles were climbing over a cargo net, climbing over a wood wall with the use of ropes, climbing over junk cars, jumping over and crawling under a series of fences, leaping over fire and crawling through a mud pit. All of these things would have been a blast when I was 10 years old. They were absolutely amazing at the ripe old age of 44.

There were several obstacles that really challenged me mentally. The organizer's website showed pictures of the obstacles that would be on the course. I had been talking about this race for weeks before it took place and had myself believing that I could conquer any obstacle they threw at me, but there were two obstacles that were daunting when I approached them during the race. The first was traversing a series of unstable, narrow planks that were raised a few feet off the ground. I ran up the ramp and stood there for several seconds trying to tell my mind that this is something I could do and that I would not fall off and break a bone or two. I watched as others gingerly went across as the planks bounced around. I finally told myself that I couldn't let a few little pieces of wood get in the way of my finishing this race. So I ran across, wobbling a few times, and down the ramp on the other side and took off running again. The other questionable obstacle was the wood wall, which was about 20 feet high. While I had myself believing that climbing the wall would be easy, a friend of mine, who was also competing in the race, kept telling me beforehand that she didn't think she was going to be able to do it. I made the mistake of allowing her doubt to take up residence in a dark

little corner of my mind. So as I approached the wall, I noted that it seemed much higher than in the pictures and the cross boards I had hoped to use as steps seemed much farther apart than my little legs could stretch. I looked at the other people climbing the wall and said out loud, "you can do this" and just started to climb. As it turned out, I flew up that wall and before I climbed down the other side, I hesitated at the top to let out a victorious whoop. Conquering that obstacle was an amazing feeling.

Somewhere in the middle of the race, I had a sudden feeling of joy. It dawned on me that I was actually running this crazy race. Not only was I running it, but I was passing people. I realized that three years previous, I wouldn't have even gone to watch the fun because it was too far to walk my obese body from the parking lot to the start/finish line. It didn't matter what place I finished in. Just competing was winning.

Even though I have done many 5Ks and 10Ks, running is not one of my favorite things to do. Then why do I run? Because I can. It is something I had not been able to do for most of my life. Running makes aware that I am free from the fat. I am captivated by the sound my shoes make as the toes push against the gravel to propel me forward. I focus on that sound. It is mesmerizing. It makes me realize just how far I have come. And that makes me happy. If running 5Ks and 10Ks made me feel like that, imagine how amazing it would feel to run a half marathon, which I figured would take about 2 ½ hours to finish. So I decided to take that on as my new challenge. I did some research and found what I figured would be the perfect race in which to meet this new goal. It was the Rock 'n' Roll Las Vegas Marathon and Half Marathon. It is known to be the flattest course that organization runs. I certainly didn't need any hills to battle. Since it was on The Strip at night, I figured there would be so much activity (neon signs, odd people, etc.) that I would be so distracted I would forget I was running.

It is easy to get on the computer and register for a race, but sometimes the magnitude of what you signed up for doesn't hit you until later. That is what happened to me. Not only did I register for it, but I also went around telling people that I was going to do it, so there was no way I could back out. The more I thought about it, the more I started to think I was in way over my head. I had no knowledge of how to properly train for a race of that distance, so I asked Joseph if he would help me. He was a runner. He had run in races like this. He readily agreed, but since he was still living in another city at that time, I relied on his coaching me by text. This presented a challenge because I was fairly limited in expressing myself due to the lack of space and the time it took to type on my phone. Basically, I reported to him every couple of weeks with my progress and he determined

whether or not it was time to increase the distance. Other than that, I was basically on my own.

I registered eight months before the race was to be held. Even though registering that far in advance gave me ample time to train, I knew I was going to have to make the most of that time. I started running three times a week. I kept my distances short for a couple months, usually about 3-4 miles. I figured that my body would slowly get used to that distance and automatically want to go farther at some point. I was wrong. My speed wasn't increasing and I wasn't really having much fun. I began to question my decision to compete. I thought about giving up and just considering my entry fee a donation to the charity the run supported. I had been having some knee pain and had seen a doctor about it. The doctor recommended physical therapy. When I told the physical therapist about the upcoming race, he quietly said that he didn't recommend I continue long-distance running. He said that he would help me with this goal, but after that I should take up long-distance bicycling instead. I could have easily used that as an excuse not to run the half marathon. But, I despise quitters

As the distance of my training runs increased, I began to really struggle. It was HARD. I started to doubt whether I would be able to run the entire race. Unlike the first 10K I ran where my plan was to alternate running and walking and just finish the race, I decided that walking in the half marathon was not an option. I wanted to be able to say that I "ran" a half marathon, not just that I "completed" a half marathon. Unfortunately, the result of that was that I put a lot of pressure on myself. I kept training for it, but I was very much inside my head about whether or not I could reach that goal. I started worrying about how I would handle it if I actually had to walk part of the race.

The week before the race the excitement was building, but there was also some doubt mixed in with that excitement. I knew I was going to have to find a way to suppress that doubt, so I figured it was time to call Joseph. I sometimes think Joseph should have a big, red Superman S on his shirt because

he once again came to my rescue.

I explained to him that I was starting to think that maybe I had set my sights too high. Maybe I had unrealistic expectations when I said I was going to run the whole thing. The farthest I had run without stopping was 10.5 miles. That was about four weeks before the race, and it beat up my body pretty badly. My hip flexors were in agony, my calves felt like they were going to burst and my ankles were stiff for days afterward. I was afraid that if I tried that distance again in training, I would talk myself out of running the half marathon entirely. He said I didn't need to run that distance again, I was ready. And he explained that once I was actually running the race, my determination would take over and get me through. He didn't doubt for a second that I would run the entire race.

That had me feeling a little more confident, but there was still one thing I was worried about. I knew I was going to have to be careful about not going out too fast at the start. I didn't want to use all of my energy at the start and have nothing left to finish, but I also didn't want to go out too slowly. I wanted to finish the race in less than 2 ½ hours and a slow start would not help me accomplish that. Once again, Joseph knew exactly what to say. He asked, "Who are you racing against?" I said, "Me." He replied, "Yes, and you will never catch yourself. Life is a marathon and just like you took your weight loss journey one day at a time, you need to take this race one mile at a time. Every step forward will get you closer to your goal. Just enjoy the run and that fact that this is something you can now do. Let people pass you at the start, you will be laughing as you pass them later." With that advice, I felt for the first time that I was ready to conquer this race. So off to Las Vegas I went.

I often find that having a visual reminder of how far I had come and how much support I have gives me a boost. So, I started bugging Andrew about wanting to wear an Alpha Elite shirt in the race. A couple weeks went by, but I had not yet seen a shirt. I was starting to get a little concerned. I was

hoping to use the shirt like I had used the superhero cape in the 10K. I was trying to come up with something else I could do that would give me the same kind of motivation. I shouldn't have worried. While I was training with him a few days before I left for the race, Andrew literally took the shirt off his back and handed it to me for me to wear while I was running. That was perfect! I didn't tell him this, but I didn't wash the shirt before I left. I could smell his cologne on it and I just knew that would help me even more.

As I entered the starting chute. I started looking around. It seemed as if all of the people milling around were extremely fit. They all looked like serious runners and athletes. Fortunately, I was now considering myself to be an athlete as well, so I didn't feel out of place like I had in some of my first races. I remembered how I felt when I lined up at the starting line at my first race when I imagined everybody was staring at me, wondering who I thought I was being in an athletic event looking like I did. In my mind, I was like an elephant standing in a herd of gazelles at the start line of that first race. It felt as if there was a spotlight on me and everybody was waiting for me to humiliate myself. It was different this time. I actually felt like I belonged. I walked around proudly knowing that I put in as much work as they did to get there.

The start of the race was absolutely amazing. There were 44,000 people running en masse down the Las Vegas Strip and I was one of them. I started very slowly, much slower than I wanted to. There were so many people running together in a confined space that there was no room to run. So that first mile was more of a warmup than anything. I waved to my mother as I ran past my hotel. She and my brother, Mark and his wife, Suzie had come along to support me. I finally got into a good pace and was feeling strong. I even managed to jump over and otherwise avoid the sweatshirts that were strewn along the course without falling. It was 42 degrees at the start of the race. People had bundled up to keep warm, and when they heated up from running, they shed their sweatshirts and tossed them

to the ground

About three miles into the race, I passed Mark and Suzie, who had selected a spot along the route where they figured I might need a little encouragement. They were holding a sign that said, "Go, Lisa, Go. Alpha Elite – 210 lbs = 13 miles." That was a complete surprise. I had seen many other people standing along the route holding signs and shouting people's names, but I didn't expect to see a sign for me. That actually put a little extra pep in my step and continued on my merry way.

I made it past the 10-mile mark still feeling good about how I was doing. I had only done one 10-mile run in training and it was really difficult. So the fact that I still had some energy left at this point was encouraging. Then it hit. At the 11 mile marker, I hit a wall. I was done. My feet no longer wanted to be placed one in front of the other. There was no energy left in my legs. My breathing and heart rate were fine, but the parts of my body that actually propelled me forward were starting to give up. I didn't just want to stop and walk, I wanted to sit down. I looked up and saw the hotel in the distance that was the finish line. It didn't seem to be getting any closer. It was discouraging. Could I be satisfied with running 11 miles and walking the rest? That is farther than I had ever run before. Who would be disappointed in me? Me.

To keep myself motivated to continue running, I thought of just how far I had come in just three short years. I recalled all the training I had put in to prepare for this race, not just running, but strength training as well. All of boot camps, the leg work outs, the work on my core, the being pushed beyond what I thought were my limits by my trainers...it all came together to make me an all-around athlete who was able to compete in an endurance run. And I thought of the trainers. The voices and images of Joseph, JR, Danielle, Kimberly and Andrew flooded through my mind. Little bits of wisdom they had passed to me started floating around in my head. They all knew that at this

very moment I was running a race that I never dreamed I could do. I knew they were proud of me for just stepping across the starting line. I could only imagine how proud they would be of me to know I crossed the finish line. But, I wasn't running this for them. I was running this for me.

Then I saw the pace runner who was holding the sign that said 2:30 pass me. I could have either let that defeat me or motivate me. I chose to let it motivate me. I started to listen to the people cheering. Thousands of people were still lined up along the street yelling to anybody and everybody, offering their support. They didn't just see their friend or family member run past then leave. They stayed and cheered on everybody. They would even call out to you specifically if they could find a way to get your attention. A couple times I heard something like, "Good job, Alpha Elite, you are almost there." So, I kept running. I was going to finish this darned race even if it my legs fell off.

As I neared the finish line I was hit with an obstacle I hadn't anticipated...a hill. It was only about .10 mile and it wasn't steep, but it was brutal. At least it was for me. Fortunately, my support system was again in the right place at the right time. My mother, Mark and Suzie had worked their way to a point very near the finish line and were cheering me on again as I passed. That gave me the extra little push up that incline and across the finish line. I did it! I reached my goals. I finished a half marathon, I ran *every step* of a half marathon, and I finished in... 2 hours, 36 minutes – six minutes over my goal. I couldn't worry about that now. I had to worry about how to get my exhausted, aching body back to my hotel room in the rain that was now falling.

Looking back at that adventure now, I ask myself if I would do it again. I thought I would. As a matter of fact, I even registered for another half marathon. I was determined to reach the goal I had set about finishing a half in less than 2:30. But as I began training for it, reality kicked me in the butt. I still did not enjoy the training for it, I was stressing myself out about not meeting my own

expectation and it was taking the joy out of the 5Ks I was running. So after having a heart-to-heart talk with Kimberly, I made the decision to withdraw from the race and let somebody else take over my registration. I know I made the right decision. I am once again enjoying the shorter runs. I can go out and run just because I want to, not because I have to. Running a half marathon in 2:30 wasn't going to win me any award. It wasn't going to change who I am as a person. It wasn't going to get me any closer to the things I really wanted to accomplish. All it was going to do was beat up my already badly treated body and possibly turn me off of wanting to do any kind of running, including the mud runs which I really enjoy.

In order to experience the mental and emotional growth I did, I had to learn to open up, to be vulnerable. I had to learn that sometimes it is okay to display your mental and emotional weaknesses to others. Until I started training with Andrew, I never opened up to anyone. I guess I didn't trust people enough with my innermost thoughts, my hopes, my dreams, my doubts and my fears. I didn't believe they were important to anybody but me. Andrew kept asking questions about me and kept asking me to search within myself for answers to why I did the things I did the things I did and do the things I do. He never ridiculed me for my skewed way of thinking and always helped me work through the issues that were causing me harm. And because Andrew showed that he believed my feelings were important, I began to share them with him freely and eventually became comfortable sharing them with others as well.

With that being said, I now believe that it is okay and often helpful to expose my thoughts and feelings. So, I am going to share something that many people probably assume, but only Andrew knows for sure about me at this point and that is only because he came right out and asked. I was not planning on sharing this information in this book. I didn't see the point. After all, how can this information be motivational? But after discussing it with Kimberly and Andrew, I came to realize that by putting this out there, it will help explain why I still have bouts with a low self-image. And it will hopefully help you realize that it is normal to experience some lows along your journey. So, here it is:

One thing that I have never experienced in my life is sharing myself intimately with a man. Yes, I am 46 years old and I am a virgin. Let's take that a step further. I have never even been kissed. This

lack of a relationship does nothing to help my self-image problem. As a matter of fact, it makes it worse. It used to be that I could justify not getting any attention from men by believing that they must have had a problem with people who are fat, and that was their problem not mine. Now I can't use that explanation. Instead, I can't help but think there must be something wrong with me. I have asked some of my closest friends if there is something wrong with me. They insist there isn't, but I can't help but feel devastated at times when I see others who are not what people would consider to be attractive, are physically disfigured, are obese or are generally not nice people, who don't seem to have any trouble finding someone to share their lives with. I just don't understand why I haven't been able to find someone. When I was fat, I considered myself to be ugly. There was nothing attractive about any part of me. From my fat, swollen Fred Flintstone feet to my out-of-control hair that I usually covered up with a baseball cap I was a mess. Who could find anything to love about me? I certainly couldn't.

For the 20 years of my life when I should have been out being social and meeting people, I wasn't comfortable with my appearance so I didn't put any effort into improving it with the clothes I wore or by wearing makeup or jewelry. I was trying to be invisible. I had convinced myself that I was happy being alone. I was an independent woman and I didn't need a man in my life. That thinking however, is what has brought me to the point I am at now where I sometimes feel extreme loneliness. I often find myself in tears when I realize that there is a big, empty spot in my heart.

My friends told me that I look great and that I shouldn't have any trouble finding a date. Yet, not one of them ever suggested that they know somebody they would like to set me up with. That fed right into my thinking that there is something wrong with me. Apparently, even my friends didn't think I was attractive enough to go out with their male friends. It was a low time in my life. Since I no longer stuffed my emotions by eating, I kept myself buried in activities so that I could pretend that

the reason they weren't suggesting going out with one of their friends was because they knew I just didn't have the time. Just like when my father died, I kept myself too busy to think about my pain.

I realize that much of the problem has to do with the fact that I am just not putting myself out there. I don't show that I am interested in a man when I meet one, so why should he show any interest in me. I still tend to turn my eyes away if I see a man looking at me. It makes me uncomfortable. I retreat to that place in my mind that remembers trying to be invisible. It is something I am working on, but every time I think I am making progress in this area, it seems like I purposely sabotage my chances.

I was feeling really brave one day when I met a man at my work who I was immediately attracted to. We struck up a conversation and got along well. He was new to the area and was trying to adjust to living in a new state. I somehow mustered up the courage to suggest that we should have lunch together sometime. He agreed and we went out a lunch twice during my lunch hour from work. I would hardly consider those dates, but it was a close as I had ever come. And because I had to get back to the office by a certain time, I had an easy escape.

Our conversations during lunch were pleasant. I withheld the information about my weight loss from him hoping he would like me for who I was at that point, not because he was impressed by my journey. He was such a nice person that he actually called me after our first lunch to thank me and said he wanted to buy me some flowers, but he didn't know where to send them. I panicked. I didn't know how to handle that kind of attention. I explained that I didn't like people to spend money on me. I thought he got the point, but after our second lunch he mentioned that Christmas was coming up and he wanted to know what was on my list. Again, I shot him down. I didn't believe that I was worth anybody spending any of their hard-earned money on.

He worked at a different location than I did, but knew what floor I worked on and where my desk

was. He showed up a couple of times when he was in my building on business. I was caught off guard and felt as if he was moving way faster than I could handle. My old feelings of being unworthy came back and the figurative wall that I used to build to protect myself in the past went up quickly. I asked the receptionist to call my desk anytime she saw him come in the building. As soon as she called, I found an excuse to leave my desk. There just had to be someone on another floor I had to go talk to.

I had convinced myself that I wasn't really interested in him. So I told him that my schedule at work had changed and that it was hard for me to get away at lunchtime, which was actually true, but I could have tried harder to find another time to meet up. I guess he finally gave up. I haven't heard from him since.

My journey is not over. I am much like a snake shedding its skin. Many layers of Lisa have been peeled off, revealing a new person, but there are still many more layers that need to be shed. Just because I lost the weight, it doesn't mean that I won't be affected by having basically missed out on 20 years of living. I believe there will always be something I can work on physically, socially and personally. I will no longer settle for things just because it is easier than trying to change.

I still struggle with body image. I find myself caught between loving myself for how I look compared to three years ago, and not being happy with how I look now that I am at a normal weight. I have physical flaws that will not disappear without surgery, particularly the loose skin around my abdomen. When I look in a mirror the first thing I see is the monstrous, protruding stomach; not my thin face, my defined muscles or my kind smile. No, what I focus on is the blob of skin that pushes my shirt out like somebody who is pregnant. Even my sagging breasts, which I can literally fold in half because they lack the filling, don't bother me like my abdomen does. I can address that issue with a decent bra. Don't get me wrong, I would much rather deal with the extra skin and be as healthy and happy as I am now and able to do the things I enjoy than to be at the weight I was. I just know I would be happier about myself if the extra skin was gone. I am sure my self-image would skyrocket.

The abdomen is not the only place I have an abundance of skin. It resides on many parts of my body, but it can be hidden by my clothing. Besides the obvious appearance issue, there are some unusual functional problems that arise because of all that extra skin. For example, the extra skin on my backside sometimes inhibits my movements, especially when I am getting into bed to go to sleep. I

prefer to sleep on my back, but that extra skin often folds under me, causing some discomfort. I have to spend a few moments readjusting myself so that the skin isn't folded under me. It isn't just when I go to sleep either. There was one night in boot camp at the gym when there were eight of us lying side-by-side on mats on the floor. We were instructed to perform an exercise, then literally roll to the mat next to us to perform another exercise. When I rolled from the first mat to the second, I felt something underneath me. It felt as if someone's keys fell out of their pocket and I was lying on them. I actually stopped what I was doing to see if I could retrieve the item and toss it out of the way. It turned out to be that pesky skin.

My ultimate goal is to have skin removal surgery. I went back to the plastic surgeon to talk to him about what he could do and what the cost would be. The cost is too prohibitive for me to even consider. Financing it isn't an option because I won't be able to afford the monthly payments. I have not given up hope, but it may be a lot of years before it happens. Does anybody know the winning lottery numbers?

Skin issues aside, one of the attributes of being an athlete is not being satisfied with your performance. There will always be a desire to improve my speed, strength and agility. That means more races, continued hard work in the gym and adherence to a nutrition plan that will help bring along the desired results. A big part of my life revolves around physical activities, and staying fit is going to be the key to allowing me go do the things I enjoy most.

And I am going to have to figure out the whole social thing. I am going to have to learn to love myself and believe that there is something there for others to love as well. I have a group of friends who are crazy enough to drag me along with them when they go out on the town. They are so much younger than I, but have taken me under their wings and are helping me to discover the things I

missed out on when I hid myself in my protective shell. They are helping me learn to discover who was really buried in that cocoon. They have taken me to places I never imagined I would be. One of those places was a gay bar. I learned so much about self-acceptance and being non-judgmental by going to that bar. It was comfortable. I could be who I was. I didn't have to put on any airs. However, it definitely wasn't the place for me to meet men.

So, how does a person start their own fitness journey?

Start with small steps if you have to, but start. Even making small changes in your diet and doing exercise for a short period of time will get you headed in the right direction. Nobody expects you to be able to go from sitting on a couch eating nachos one day to running a half marathon the next.

Ask for help. Everybody needs help every once in a while. You can't be expected to be an expert in nutrition or exercise. Consult a nutritionist. Sign up for personal training. Talk to your doctor. Get involved with a support group. You don't even have to spend money or leave your home to get support. There are people out there willing to help. There is an abundance of resources and support groups online. Don't be too proud to ask for help. Your journey will be much easier with the guidance and support of professionals, people who have been there and people who are embarking on the same journey.

Be selfish. You are going to have to pay more attention to what is going to propel you toward your goal than to what others may want. It is time to start thinking about you. This doesn't come easily for many people. It didn't for me. I always put the wants and needs of others ahead of my own. But, once I embarked on this journey and people saw the sacrifices I was making to better myself, those I thought I was letting down actually respected my decision to concentrate on me. In the end it made me a stronger person.

Let go of the negative people in your life. This goes right along with being selfish. I don't mean that if somebody is struggling and they are depressed or unhappy about something that you should

ignore them. There is a time and a place to be there for people just like they have been there for you, but you will find people in your life whose negativity brings you down, whose attitude and actions constantly influence your mood negatively and who don't add anything of value to your life. It may seem harsh, but you need to distance yourself from these individuals. Many of you have spent too many years trying to be there for others, thinking of their needs over yours. It is time to turn that around and let positive people influence your life. There are so many people out there who can lift you higher and who will make your life much happier if you let them. Look for these people. They aren't hard to find. You just need to let them in.

Believe that you are worth it! This is perhaps the most important advice I can give. You have to know that you are worth the time, effort and sacrifice that this journey is going to take. There is nobody as valuable as you. You are the one who is going to have to live in your body. You are the one who is going to feel the aches and pains. You are the one who is going to have to try to fight diabetes, high blood pressure and possibly cancer. You are a valuable human being and you deserve to enjoy your life. You can do this!

With all of that being said, don't fool yourself into believing that it is going to be easy. You can watch people on reality weight-loss shows and see people on the news who have dropped a tremendous amount of weight in a short period of time and it seems as if it will be easy to lose the same amount of weight they did in a similar period of time, but that is not the norm. The reality is that is probably not going to happen for you. You can be sure that you will have to work harder than you ever have. You will have to stay strong and committed. You will have to dig deep inside of yourself and pull out a determination you didn't know was there. You will have to rely on you and only you. The good news is that in the end it will be worth every ounce of energy you put into it. You will appreciate your victory much more knowing that you earned it.

One of the things that worked well for me was to let people know that I was on this journey of self-improvement. I found that when I let people know, they went out of their way to support me. Not one person ever tried to sabotage me. If they had, I would have distanced myself from them. No true friend is going to try to discourage or sabotage you, so look for those who offer support and keep in close touch with them. Ask for their help. Allow them to be involved. They will encourage, motivate and cheer you every step of the way.

You will benefit from becoming aware of who you can turn to for the needed support, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. You will find them in your church. You will find them in your place of work. You will find them in your gym. Even strangers can be a source of support if you open yourself up to that possibility. If there is one thing I have learned through my fitness journey, it is the value of a good, strong support system. Without the never-ending support of my family, friends, co-workers, church family and trainers, I would be much farther behind where I am and I would be missing some very essential elements in the person I am becoming. It would have taken me a lot longer than three years if it hadn't been for the support system I surrounded myself with. Of course, you can do it on your own, but without people behind you and your mission, your battle will be much harder. I had so many people on my side that I would never be able to name them all, but they know who they are. I have made sure they are aware of the important role they have played in my journey. I would give everything for any one of them. I literally owe them my life.

I understand if you are feeling overwhelmed just thinking about the work ahead of you. Just take it one day at a time. As Joseph said, "Life is like a marathon. Just take it one mile at a time. The only person you are racing is yourself. And you will never catch yourself. So just enjoy the journey." Truer words were never spoken. You are in a marathon. You are in it for the long haul. So take your

fitness journey one mile at a time, one day at a time, one meal at a time. Marathoners sometimes have bad miles. They hit a wall, but they keep moving forward. That is how you should approach your new eating plan. You might very well hit a wall and not want to continue. You might even stumble and go back to your old ways. Don't beat yourself up about it. Just set your mind on the next meal and do the best you can with it. With each passing meal you will get that much stronger and stronger you get, the more you will enjoy your accomplishments. Gaining control of your will power is a great feeling.

There will be times when your body will rebel. There will be times when you work you ass off in the gym and you are strict with your diet, but for some reason the scale doesn't cooperate and your weight doesn't drop, or worse, your weight increases a little. Don't panic. This is normal. Your body may become used to what you are doing. I have been there. I know the frustration. Don't give up. Change up your workouts. Give your body something else to think about for a while. Confuse it. It will respond to the change.

I have been asked if my weight loss and fitness journey is the hardest thing I have done. The answer is yes,, but it is also the most rewarding thing I have done. Sure, the half marathon was extremely hard for me. Keeping myself motivated to train for that was a constant struggle. When I hit the wall at mile 11 during that race, I had to dig deep within myself and pull out every last ounce of determination to keep running. You would think *that* would have been the hardest thing I have done. In some respects it was, but that was just a small fraction of time in the big scheme of things. My fitness journey lasted three years. Three years of planning meals, saying no to temptation and going to the gym when I wanted to sleep in. That took a lot more will power. That was me deciding I was worth the effort and sacrifice. So it was by far, the hardest thing I have done, but it was also the best thing I have done and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

I started off with baby steps. Each tiny step led me to a point where I could take a few more. These steps became longer and faster and I soon took flight. Others refer to me as a butterfly, finally pushing through the cocoon of fat, spreading my wings and now floating through the happiest days of my life. I prefer to think of myself as an athlete, fighting for her life and finding her full potential. I learned more about myself than I really cared to know and I became the person I always wanted to be. I found Lisa. And this Lisa is less than half the size, but more than twice the person.

This was my victory. Now go out and earn *your* victory.