

She was dying to be thin

By Jessica Fuller
Reporter

There is a girl at this school who once worried that having a stick of gum would cause her to gain weight.

There is a girl at this school who once spent her recess time not socializing with friends, but running laps around a soccer field - alone.

There is a girl at this school who once carried only 89 pounds on her 5'4" frame, was cold even in the summer heat and went to a psychiatrist for two-and-a-half years to talk as she allowed her body to eat away at itself.

That girl is me.

You would never be able to tell today. I consider myself happy and healthy, but I can never forget the person I was five years ago - the person who believed that her self worth was based on what did, or did not, enter her mouth. I have decided to tell my story because I know that not only are there others out there who live a story similar to mine, but hundreds of girls that believe their self worth is based on a number on a scale and an approval of that number by the masses. Being a certain weight will not bring true happiness to anyone's life - trust me, I know.

My battle with anorexia began at the beginning of seventh grade - I was a tomboy-ish thirteen year old who had always been a stubborn, self-driven achiever. You could say that adolescence hit me with its one-two punch a little too hard; I was knocked out of the ring of life for nearly three years as I struggled for control of a life that was changing. I moved. I started middle school. I grew a chest. I got hips. My classmates started "going out" with each other. I suddenly felt thrust into a world that was harsh and mean compared to my comfortable childhood. Everything was spinning around me, and I was desperate for any way to get out of there - fast. But I couldn't stop my friends. I couldn't stop my body. I couldn't stop time. I could, however, stop eating - and to me, that was power.

During this time I was bombarded with articles on how to be "healthy" along with pictures personifying "healthy" as thin. All the magazines' tips on becoming healthy centered around cutting out fat and increasing exercise. At the time I weighed normal for my height and age, but as I read these articles, I began to think that dropping a few pounds would not only lower my risk of cancer, heart disease, and any other number of diseases, but I would also have the body of those "healthy" girls I saw in the pictures. I would be approved and adored by all those around me. As I would find out later, the complete opposite was true.

The magazines suggested that the average dieter cut her snacks in half as a beginning to the

"new and improved you." But I refused to be average and did away with them entirely. They proposed having desserts only a few times a week; I did not eat another one for over two years. They pointed towards a cut in calories - but if 250 calories was good, why not cut 500? 1000? I began to walk and run two or three hours a day, and my head went dizzy as I tried to compute how much I had eaten and how much I had burned. I felt like I had failed when my caloric intake was a positive number. Pretty soon I was trapped in my eating disorder, scared of what I was doing and even more terrified to leave the comfort I got from this control. I saw food as not a vital part of survival, but as an enemy that could kill me.

When I was younger I remember reading about "Growing Pains" Tracy Gold's battle with anorexia and I was confused by the idea - not wanting to eat? Why couldn't she just stop starving herself? Now I can look back and realize that you can't judge a person until you've walked a mile in her shoes - and for me that was hundreds of miles as I paced about hoping I had burned off my carrot sticks from lunch. I did push ups in the bathroom stall. I did calf raises as I sat at my desk. I tried to hide my shrunken body under sweatshirts, but clothes could not hide the painful thoughts inside my head. My bony arms and angular jaw were simply the outside appearance of my very serious problem.

At this point, however, I simply could not stop. I thought that if I controlled food, I'd have control of my life, when actually, my life was more chaotic than ever. Food was my way of competing - I felt stronger and superior when I looked about the table and saw I was eating fewer calories than anyone else by far. I saw others as weak. They had given in and had a second serving of ice cream or ordered another full-calorie Coke, but I had resisted the temptation and therefore dropped another pound. The idea of weighing 100 pounds sounded normal to me, but I could never settle for normal. I had to be better than normal - I had to weigh the least. I was running a race for my life that I was determined to win, and the scariest part is that the finish line for any anorexic is death.

After a few months of this, however, the high I got from beating others at eating became less and less. Suddenly I felt like the loser as I admired others' ability to simply decide to have some pretzels, instead of computing the amount into a daily limit, like I did. These people were both thin and heavy set, but they all shared one thing - they seemed happy. I also realized that everyone was angry with me - my parents were so worried about me that they yelled at me for the first time in my life. My brothers were scared of my skeletal body and my friends were long gone as I had pushed them out of my life to replace them with nutrition facts

and the caloric intakes of celebrities. I also realized that I didn't like myself in the state that I was. My fingernails were purple because I had no energy to heat my body. My hair fell out. I was tired all the time, I was lonely, I had no fun. I suddenly realized that, deep down, someone named Jessica, someone I had ignored for so long, didn't like to do 200 sit-ups before bed. She didn't like eating her baked potato plain. She didn't like doing everything that was expected of her. And slowly, I started to listen to Jessica more than my disease and compulsion.

It wasn't easy. I went to a psychiatrist once a week, a fact I once covered up but am now not afraid to admit. Everyone needs to talk with someone about problems and worries - some, like me, need it on a regular basis and with a trained professional. I am proud to say that I went to therapy. I am also proud to say that I don't need to go anymore.

That does not mean that I have completely forgotten this part of my life, or never think about what I spoon on my plate. It will forever be a part of me and I would not trade in those years for happier ones, because those years created the person that I am today: someone that I am not only proud to be, but someone I care about and trust enough that I am confident I will never be so hurtful to myself again. But as the quote goes, "If you're an alcoholic, you can get away from alcohol; if you're a drug addict, you can get away from drugs; but if you have a food disorder, you cannot get away from food - you have to eat to live."

And that is what I have learned - that there is a time for ice cream and a time for carrot sticks, time for a jog around the neighborhood and time to veg out on the couch, time to be an adult and time to be a kid. There is also time for friends,

family, people who love you and people you love, and that is what I concentrate on now. I thought that by controlling food, I could protect myself from hurtful changes, but in actuality, food went on to control me. As I faced my fear of food, I also faced my fear of change, of disappointing people, and of disappointing myself. I learned that I was in control of my life, and I am happy that I am still here to live it.

The irony of this story is that even when I was at my thinnest, women would come up to me and remark on my lost weight in a complimentary tone, asking if I had any advice for them on how to shed a few pounds. That angered me because not only did I know I looked horrible and was unhappy, but I realized that they are just one part of the cycle women go through - a lifelong compulsion to fit their bodies into a mold in order to be accepted and liked. My heart breaks every time I hear of someone obsessing over their body image, be it a fifth grader scraping the cheese off her pizza, or a forty-year old refusing to have her photo taken in a bathing suit. "Healthy" and "happy" are not numbers - they come from inside. With the support of my family, I rediscovered my happiness and my health. They had been with me all the time, but I was too afraid to claim them as my own and to stand up and say, "I am person. I am a woman. I am important. I am an individual. I am loved. I am beautiful." Now I can.

Editor's Note: If you or anyone you know is suffering from an eating disorder, talk to anyone you trust, a staff member in the Student Health Center, or call the Moses Cone Hospital Nutritional Center at (336) 271-4936.

Learn for the sake of learning

By Matt Sandbank
Staff Writer

In my 16 years, I have met far fewer people than I would have hoped to meet who are free from the influence of the grading system which we as students are subjected to for the first quarter of our lives.

On the other hand, I have met all degrees of those who are attached somehow to their grades and test scores. I've met those who are bound hand and foot to the responsibility of nurturing their grade. I've met those who profess to bitterly resent the grading system, yet who tend to their grade just as faithfully as the rest. I've met those who know how to discuss little else besides their past, present, or prospective grades.

And I've met those who boast a strong schoolwork ethic, yet who consistently look for pity and sympathy from their peers for their excessive labors. For the most part, however, I've met those who have mixed traits of all of the above-mentioned character types.

Most students try to improve, or at least maintain, a healthy grade, while at the same time trying to maintain a healthy amount of personal freedom. It seems as if all students submissively accept grades as the only marker of scholastic achievement, the only insurance of future success, the only path to true salvation. The reasons for this sort of thinking are absurd.

One reason is the need for some sort of tangible result which schoolwork produces. People simply cannot find contentment in the idea of learning for the sake of learning. They cannot

find contentment in the idea of having been educated. The problem lays in the fact that, contrary to popular opinion, grades do not show whether or not a student has actually learned something. Grades will never be able to do this. They display temporary and focused memorization, to be sure, but little else. The only time that a person will truly learn something is when he or she willingly embraces the lesson. Grades are not an achievement, but a number, or a letter, and nothing more.

Furthermore, solid grades are seen as the only real way to insure "success" in life. Of course, that's fast becoming reality, but I'm just too idealistic to believe that one can no longer survive and thrive on their wits alone. Those personalized abilities present from birth, no matter how petty they may seem, will always transcend those which are labored for later on in life and which are established as a societal status quo.

Despite my personal feelings, however, I am not calling for the removal of the present grading system. What I am calling for is student disregard for the grading system. It is really not as hard to do as it may seem. Believe that there are matters more important in life than grades, and then live accordingly to that belief.

Before too long, you will begin to realize that the grading system is little more than the preparation of young people to an impersonal society. And when you really think about it, 16 years old is too young to accept that kind of nonsense. And so is 17, and 18, and 19...



Volume 75 Issue 4

The *High Life* Staff welcomes comments in the form of letters to the editor from students, faculty, and the reading public. Letters may be turned in to the office. All letters must be signed. The staff reserves the right to reject any letter containing libelous statements, the right to edit for length and grammatical errors, and the right to ascertain the truthfulness of its content. The *High Life* is published eight times a year and is produced by the students of Grimsley High School, 801 Westover Terrace, Greensboro, NC 27408. The *High Life* functions as a medium for creative journalistic pursuits as well as a training instrument for aspiring journalists, artists, and writers. The *High Life* functions as a public forum for student expression.

Editors in Chief: Scott Fischer and Emily Schiller. **Editorial Editor:** Kate Peeples, **News Editor:** Mary Kristen Kelly, **Feature Editors:** Dina Ackermann and Rob Roper. **Sports Editors:** Kevin Link and Julie Robinson, **Advertising Managers:** Julie Kenny and Taylor Stevens, **Business Manager:** Carey Williams, **Staff Writer:** Matt Sandbank, **Reporters:** Will Betton, Greg Dolan, Amanda Earp, Jessica Fuller, Daniel Guttentag, Allison Hannon, Angie Jeffreys, Ashley Kelly, Meredith Lemon, Brian Prout, Nicole Rozelman, Justin Smith, **Adviser:** Linda Kidd.