



My Story

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It all started with a cat.

My healing journey begins with a cat.

In 1980, when my parents and I lived in a basement apartment in Long Island, we came in, turned on the lights, and there she was -- a beautiful tabby rolling around, playing and stretching out her long body on our living room carpet as if she'd been there her whole life.

I took one look at her and whispered: "Isn't she a honey bunny?"

Honey Bunny, the tabby who found her way into my home and my heart, would be with me for the next 20 years -- half of my adult life by the time she passed away. Today, at 63 years old, I realize she was the impetus in my life for all that was right and just.

Healthy eating and fitness in my 20s

One day, I looked at Honey Bunny and thought to myself: "Why am I eating animals when I am so in love with you?"

Right then and there I went vegetarian -- lacto vegetarian, so I ate dairy, but skipped eggs. I never liked seafood so giving up fish was easy. Eating more greens was literally a gut feeling. Intuition guided me, even though I was just 26 years old and didn't know yet about the horrors of industrial animal agriculture.

Back then, I worked as an actress in Shakespearean plays! I had already discovered the joys of working out and exercise boosted my stamina during rigorous performance tours. Jane Fonda's cassette tapes came with me -- I'd be on stage as Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* or Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* -- and then back in my hotel room sweating to Jane Fonda's aerobics. She taught me well!

The year I became vegetarian was also the last year in theater. A grand finale, too, with animal flesh. It'd take another year for me to discard the pleasure-trapping combination of salt, fat and sugar in cheese.

Pioneering the senior fitness scene in Brooklyn

In 1990, inspired by Jane Fonda tapes and the joy I found in exercise, I became a certified Group Fitness Instructor with the American Council of Exercise. For a woman -- a vegan, no less -- to be hired as a personal trainer by the Eastern Athletic Clubs in Brooklyn Heights was unusual in the early 90s. Many male trainers gave me crap about my plant-based lifestyle! Years later, the same trainers came to me for advice on training and food.

The Club recognized my potential and within two years offered me a program to run called Senior Fit. The Club also sponsored my year-long certification process as an Older Adult Personal Trainer with the American Senior Fitness Association, of which I was a member until it folded in 2019. (I currently hold a Senior Fitness Consultant certification through an affiliate of the American Council on Exercise.)

Back in Brooklyn, I taught weekly class to students 50 and over with an average age of 75. But we didn't just do classes! I also took students for walks across the entire span of the Brooklyn Bridge. We had meeting points along the way with me running back and forth monitoring their heart rates and taking water and stretch breaks. My octogenarian and older students joined us as well.

Many of my students were on medications and they came to me with their medical issues pre-internet, which forced me to do research by contacting their doctors -- a practice I still embrace even with Google at my fingertips!

As a senior fitness instructor, I learned the two most important aspects of working as a trainer in the 50+ demographic -- knowing movement contraindications and medication side effects. Today, I add diet to this important trio. But even back in my Brooklyn days, I'd take students shopping at our local D'Agostino's and teach them how to read nutritional labels. They learned to eat more greens!

Personal challenges

While I succeeded in helping others, the end of the century proved personally challenging. I got

married in 1989 and the marriage soon went downhill -- so did my relationship to food. I never wanted to go home and turned to food for comfort -- starving, bingeing, purging and over-exercising -- all at once.

I put myself in rehab. Fortunately, I chose wisely -- a rehab run by Yoga Seiks, all of whom were medical doctors and nurses. My ass got kicked three times a day with hour-long Kundalini yoga classes in the heat of an Arizona sun. Food was mostly vegan. Herbs replaced medications. The program also included therapies from individual to group to 12 step and massage.

Rehab was intense and just what I needed for me, but not for the marriage. When I returned home, the relationship crumbled and I relapsed into another cycle of eating disorders. I distinctly recall really craving and bingeing on chocolate and cheese. In 1992, the year of the divorce, I went to a psychiatrist for help and was diagnosed with manic-depression -- a moment that marked the beginning of a twenty-five plus year period during which I tried every type of psychotropic drug. Lithium was a standout back then after the famous actress Patty Duke got the same diagnosis.

This dark, painful part of my life had silver linings. I grew to understand and own the power of exercise and regular weight-lifting workouts to help pull me through the entire ordeal. There were days when the exercise bike was my enemy -- at least it seemed so! -- and other days when it was my savior. I stretched and did weights. I ran. I picked up step aerobics and rebounding. Movement, instead of inertia, became part of my continuing health journey. Now I love it -- every step and every jump of the way.

A household of six

Over the course of the years, I brought in four more cats off the street, all within months of each other, to my huge apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn, which was a short bike ride away from the Club.

Honey Bunny, as you know, was already the queen of my heart.

Then came Bharat, a beauty inherited from my dear friend Michal, who passed away during the AIDS crisis. He asked me if I would take her in just before he transitioned to the other side. Michal had adopted Bharat from Bideawee, an animal adoption organization founded in 1903! Bharat had slept at the foot of the bed on Michal's right side and she did the same with me another fourteen years.

Then came Sweetie Pie. She was born in my Brooklyn backyard. Sweet is the best way I can

describe her, hence her name. Sweetie Pie, the sweetest, was with me from day one until her twenty-first year.

One day, I met a kitten in the bodega across the street from my apartment who adopted me as she crawled up my leg, wrapped herself around my shoulders and rested quietly. I asked the owner of the bodega if I could take her and he yelled: "I don't care, she was here to kill the rats in the basement." Kitty would share her life with me for another nineteen years.

Shortly after Kitty came home with me, I was walking home from the Atlantic Avenue subway along Fourth Avenue and heard a meow from across the way. I crossed, met Samson on a stoop and thought: "You'll be the first male." Samson became the goofy one and remained funny for another eighteen years.

Me and the cats were a household of six until the year 2000 when my darling Honey Bunny made her journey across the Yellow Brick Road on January 15. Honey Bunny's passing inspired me to think beyond ripped abs and biceps. By the time I moved to South Beach in 2001, I knew I wanted to become a certified Hatha Yoga instructor.

Leaving New York City

I left New York City with my four cats just a few weeks after 9/11 -- a traumatic time for me and for the nation. I knew thirty souls who departed that day, including a very special fireman, Fireman Dave. I couldn't have known, six months prior, when I had set a moving date, that terrorism would strike and that Miami Beach would be one of the hardest hit cities from the attack. Five of six gyms where I had lined up jobs folded.

Still, all was not lost. At the age of 44, I attended Yoga Teacher Training at the Synergy Center for the Healing Arts when it was run by the exquisite Gaia Buddhai. A year later, I took a private Prenatal Yoga Instructor Teacher Training with the equally exquisite Allaine Strickland, founder of Gentle Therapeutics Yoga.

The food journey

By the time I started studying yoga for teacher certification (2001), I had been on a raw vegan journey for five years (2001). But three months after the move, and still within a year of 9/11, a personal tragedy threw me a curveball -- my father's passing. I went back to a lacto-vegetarian diet and had more issues with bingeing, although no purging. (See the pattern? I loved cheese!) I gave up the gym and only practiced yoga. Weight started to pack on and I was back on the psychotropic drugs even though I had been off them for a few years back in Brooklyn. My

doctors had told me they were safe and FDA tested. I trusted the psychiatrists.

Singing

Thankfully, I started feeling more confident through the teacher training at Synergy Yoga. Eventually, I returned to a raw vegan lifestyle, and reclaimed my singing voice. Yoga introduced me to Kirtan and this Brooklyn gal learned she loved to sing in Sanskrit!

It was a long time coming -- from the tender age of ten, I had been in love with Judy Garland's voice, which I felt was at the very heart of my soul. I cut an album in 2003 and released it in 2004. Barbara Cook was a mentor. I ran around the world to study with her and see her perform until 2009. I was also getting leaner and stronger, older and wiser -- I experienced the many benefits of lifting weights while being raw vegan all the way.

Dark times, again

Then, dark times started to loom when my feline family started to pass away. Bharat had left us in 2003. A year to the day of her passing, another friend found me -- Posh, a feisty, gorgeous black kitten who came to live with me for fourteen years. She slept in Bharat's spot on the bed. It's like she knew I'd need comfort.

By the end of 2010, I said my final goodbyes to Samson, Kitty and Sweetie Pie.

One loss really hit me hard that same year. My bestest, bestest, bestest friend in the whole world down here in Miami Beach, Linda, succumbed to a rare malignant melanoma.

She had been my first personal training client in 2001. Her diagnosis in 2010 was followed by four years of crushing illness that brought back the worst in my self-sabotaging behavior. I relapsed to a lacto-vegetarian diet, and tossed away any and all self-care to focus on Linda. I slept many nights in the hospice facility next to her until she died in 2014.

One bright light during Linda's cancer and my human caregiver journey, was the welcome appearance of Boy and China -- a 10-month old cat and a kitten, respectively. China was quickly adopted by a work mate. Boy needed time to adapt. At first, he lived on the landing of a stairwell in my building. I kept him company at night by sleeping on a folding chair. After three days, he came home with me to meet his sister, the not-so-sweet Posh.

Massage School

Linda's posthumous generosity opened a new door for me. In 2015, I began a two-year licensure program for massage therapy at Educating Hands. At the age of 57, going back to school was no joke! The exquisite Iris Burman and a team of instructors knocked me out with their dedication, knowledge and compassion. To this day, I call Natalia Guida my massage mentor.

Something unusual happened in my second year -- I started hearing voices. I could've sworn I was schizophrenic -- I even told my school chums! Then one of the gals told me that one of the psychotropic drugs might be the cause. Admittedly, the medications had never helped me sleep. For years, I rarely slept more than three hours a night. Near the end of Kitty's life, I was sleeping just one hour a day -- for three weeks straight. I found myself driving on the wrong side of the street.

Interestingly enough, in 2014, I had been diagnosed with posterior vitreous detachment. The doctor told me that it was normal -- "everyone gets this when they age." My intuition said otherwise -- common and normal are not the same.

I looked up one of my drugs and found a citation on the NIH website that said patients on Lamotrigine (Lamictal) for over 10 years experienced retinal side effects. It all started to add up, and I did something I would never encourage anyone else to do: I started decreasing the doses of all of my medications. I lied to the shrink -- the poor guy never knew. He was kind but easily fooled. In two and a half years, by 2017, I was free of them all and the voices stopped. That same year, I graduated class valedictorian!

I still had one more health hurdle. Between Linda's illness and death, and my graduation, I remained lacto-vegetarian and gained 42 pounds. One day in class, however, when we learned how to measure blood pressure with a sphygmomanometer, I got a reality check. I had always been smug about having low blood pressure and suddenly it was elevated. That very next day, I returned to a vegan diet and kicked out junk and dairy from my life.

By September of 2017, now free of medications, I had lost 20 pounds, eating cooked and raw vegan foods while exercising. It was fast. It just happened naturally. No bingeing, no purging. Just good food and exercise.

Hurricane Irma

One night, just before Hurricane Irma made landfall (Sept 2017), I fell onto the floor in writhing pain. It was a crazy scene: me shuffling to prepare for the storm after the weather forecasters said beach residents would have no home to come back to if Irma landed west. They said windows could be blown out, that kitchen cabinets could come down and that the building would be flooded by the ocean nearby. I damn near packed up my entire 400 square foot apartment while trying to protect all I could -- all while writhing in pain that felt like a hot knife stabbing me in my left ovary.

The next morning, Posh, Boy and I evacuated to a pet friendly hotel, La Quinta Inn. We were there a week while I suffered more attacks. More of them came until 2018, 12 pounds lighter, still exercising at my local gym, where I also taught yoga.

The diagnoses

When I finally went to a doctor, he poo-pooed my symptoms. His female resident said she wanted to prescribe tests and scans, but he balked. I told him: "If you don't give me this, I'm taking this elsewhere." He replied: "That sounds like a threat." To which I answered: "It is!"

I got my referrals and went to new doctors. What the first doctor dismissed turned out to be a long list of my next health challenges: eight masses with two left ovarian cysts touching the sigmoid colon -- all of it the size of a grapefruit; one ovarian cyst on the right, the size of a small orange; two thyroid nodules; one enlarged lymph gland in my neck; a tumor in my liver; dense left breast tissue; and a skin tag on my anus the size of one joint of my thumb.

It didn't end there. Later, I also found out more of what was going on in my body: I had a very thick uterine lining that was within a fraction of becoming uterine cancer; three high cancer markers, and another that was questionable. I was diagnosed with a subclinical hypothyroid. With high homocysteine, I was a candidate for a heart attack. My B12, protein, Vitamin D were all low. I had the osteoporosis of a 90 year old.

I went to a medical clinic for more treatment options. The female gynecologist said I needed an oophorectomy. Because it's a clinic, I asked: "When was your last oophorectomy?" She replied: "Two and a half years ago." My parting words were: "You're not experimenting on me."

I found another gynecologist -- a male. He said I needed a hysterectomy. I had found out that he was leaving the hospital to start a private practice that same month. "I'm sorry, Doc," I said. "But

I don't want to be the down payment for your new lease." Smug again, but oh so right. I fired him.

At long last, I came across a female gynecologist who worked with me instead of against me, and backed up my Whole Foods Plant Exclusive Lifestyle, which now included the work of Chef AJ, who cleaned up my eating even more by going SOFAS free -- no salt, no oil (fats yes, oils no), no flour, no alcohol, no sugar (fruits yes, sugar no). Alcohol had never been an issue -- I hadn't had a glass of wine since Linda died in 2014. I didn't think it was possible to maintain SOFAS free, but I dropped more weight, got stronger and most importantly -- embraced the lifestyle with passion. I loved living this way.

More healing since Chef AJ

Much has happened to bring me to balance since Hurricane Irma four years ago. Donna Perrone, another bestie friend who lives in New York City, introduced me to colonic hydrotherapy, essential oils, purely sourced supplements, infrared saunas, castor oil pack treatments, and more.

After doing more research, I traded massages for personal training with Natalia Guida and massage for acupuncture with Dr. Sandra Breiterman.

Dr. Frank Sabatino, whom I met through Chef AJ, guided me through a sixteen-day water and juicing fast.

Most importantly, I steadfastly continue my entire protocol, which includes rebounding, lifting weights and practicing yoga.

During the pandemic, I lost my beautiful baby Boy to a rare heart condition. Eleven days after Boy departed, another cat came home with me. I had met T -- T for terrific -- a year earlier when he was feral. Today, he owns my apartment and we are devoted to each other.

Through the ups and downs of the pandemic, including the loss of Boy, I remained steadfastly devoted to a vegan lifestyle. Chef AJ is right, if it's in your house, it's in your mouth. I eat simply, and am comfortable at my weight averaging 120 pounds.

Blood work

My 2021 blood work came back with amazing results. Transvaginal ultrasound revealed that

my thickened uterine lining reduced by 33% and the threat of uterine cancer was gone. The right ovarian cyst is also gone. I no longer have subclinical hypothyroid. I no longer have osteoporosis. All of these improvements occurred without drugs or surgery.

I'm blessed to have doctors who are open to other healing approaches. With the exception of the brilliant but non-patriarchal Dr. Frank Sabatino, my gynecologist, gastroenterologist, primary care physician and endocrinologist are all fabulous females, mostly millennial in age.

Even my gastroenterologist understands my need for monthly colonics because I have a tortuous Sigmoid Colon. If the cysts decide to move position, the act of defecating is brutal and the pain is fierce.

As well, my endocrinologist taught me that Lithium, the medication I had taken decades earlier for two years, was responsible for my two thyroid nodules and possibly for other endocrine system masses. The one thing I asked of them all is to give me some time. I know I can do this.

Where I'm at today

I say to peers, take no prisoners. We can do this. Lift weights. I don't care if it's with just an exercise band. Get stronger. I do this for the serenity and peace it brings my mind. I am active because I love to sweat and I love a calm brain even more.

I've faced so many challenges and yet my body is strong. It's not perfect. I still have seven masses but they are quiet and haven't grown. I am not in pain. I stretch. I jump on a rebounder wearing light wrist weights. I fitness walk on my home beach, wearing a weighted vest (don't do this unless you know you do not have spinal wedge fractures!) I eat Whole Foods Plant Exclusive, SOFAS free. I love my feline-filled life. I love helping women. (And yes, men too!) Let's get stronger as we age. We got this!