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Teacher wins big with weight-loss effort

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Fourth-graders Brooke Reynolds and Warren Jackson hold up a sweatshirt in front of their teacher, Derrick Hopkins once, it fit him, but not since his successful program of diet and exercise.

Staff Photo/Alvin Reiner

Staff Photo



Outwardly, Derrick Hopkins appeared a happy overstuffed teddy bear; inside, it ate away at him that he was morbidly obese.

A little over a year ago, he overloaded the scales at 409 pounds. Though tall, at 6-foot 8, the fourth-grade teacher found his 54-inch-waist pants were getting tight. Now he is down to a size 38, 142 pounds lighter.

"It's really cool. I can buy clothes like others," he said. "They're a lot cheaper, and I don't have to go to the special fat store."

NO SURGERY NEEDED

Derrick began gaining weight in fifth grade.

"In the seventh grade, I was 6 feet tall and weighed over 200 pounds," he said. "By the time I graduated from high school, I weighed 300 pounds.

"You can't print the names they used to call me."

In the fall of 2008, he experienced some shortness of breath that pushed him to take control of his weight once and for all.

Derrick opted for gastric bypass surgery at Adirondack Medical Center, but before that could happen, he needed to lose a certain amount of weight.

So he started a diet program through the Plattsburgh office of Health Management Resources (HMR) Weight Management of NY.

As part of his weight-loss regimen, he found he had to overhaul his caloric intake, dropping to between 1,000 and 1,200 per day instead of his previous 4,000 to 5,000 calories. And he began dropping pounds quite fast.

"I actually responded so well to the diet that I ended up not having the surgery," Derrick said.

The teacher got a real education through HMR, realizing that mindless eating was responsible for much of his weight problem. Without thinking, he'd eat such trouble-causing foods as peanut butter, red meats, chips and candy.

Now his diet revolves around fresh fruits and vegetables, protein shakes, veggie burgers, ground turkey and Egg Beaters.

"Before this, I never had a craving for a carrot," he said.

He feels changing eating habits may be more difficult in some ways than quitting cigarettes and alcohol consumption.

"You have to eat to survive. It's not like something you don't have to do. It's tough at times," he said. "I loved McDonald's (restaurant). Initially, I had to squeeze the steering wheel when I went by to force myself not to go there."

To support their son, Derrick's parents began weight-loss programs of their own; his mother, Bonnie, reduced by 80 pounds. His father, Howard, lost more than 50 pounds, which got his diabetes under control.

"I couldn't have done this without them," Derrick said. "We all supported each other."

&subhead;LOTS OF SUPPORT

Derrick took his personal odyssey into the classroom, teaching lessons on weight management, nutrition and body image.

His students knew he was considering gastric bypass surgery and then cheered when he told them his success with diet and exercise made that unnecessary.

As a life lesson in conflict resolution, he told the kids how he'd been treated as a child.

"A lot of them were surprised that someone as big and tall as me would have been picked on and called names," he said.

The students became his cheer squad, checking in each week to see how much weight he'd lost, they encouraged him to continue on.

"What was great," he said, "was when other students ... would offer me sweets and my students would reply, 'He can't have that. It's not part of his diet.'"

He even found a way to involve math in the experience — at the end of last school year, the kids got to figure his total weight loss with a subtraction problem.

Willsboro Central School Superintendent Stephen Broadwell started a "Biggest Loser" group that would show up at Derrick's door and "force" him to get out and walk. The program now continues with a golf team theme.

"In conjunction with 'The Biggest Loser' TV show, I thought we should make this a team competition," Broadwell said. "Initially, I thought four or five would join and ended up with 30 participants. We try to be role models here so students will make good choices. Derrick is a role model of having a goal and achieving it."

The cafeteria staff has helped by providing healthier meals, the school superintendent said.

Derrick also credits RN Sandy Gothhard of Health Management Resources.

"I had to call in every week and tell her if I had problems. This was an emotional therapy support system. There were about 20 in our class, and we would text message each other for support."

Since losing the weight, Derrick has become more active.

"I bike in the gym and do toning, as I have excess skin. I am like a big balloon that has become deflated," he joked.

He now tips the scales at 267 pounds; his final goal is 220.

"Mentally, I am so much better," he said. "I used to suffer with depression on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. There were times I couldn't get myself out of bed. Other days, I would go to work, go home and eat."

Over the years, Derrick has been involved in the theater, directing many area shows, but he could not participate onstage.

"I can finally sing again, as I can breathe and can sustain a note," he enthused. "I'm a lot more active than I have ever been, as I have a lot more energy."

Derrick is more than happy to discuss his weight loss with others.

"It's interesting," he said. "A lot of people ask me questions. I'm a teacher, so I like sharing information."

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