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## After the Cut

by Nikki Massie

*“Be the Change You Wish to See in the World.”*

When I first sat down to write my story, I struggled, because I didn't think mine was that different from so many other stories featured in this magazine. I wondered, how can I add any value to the conversation about obesity?

But in thinking about it, I realized that while my story leading up to surgery was fairly typical, what happened after surgery was not.

**You've heard the basic narrative of a girl living with obesity. Girl is affected by obesity. Girl is ostracized, shunned and made to feel less than. Girl suffers from low self-esteem as a result. Girl decides to take action and get healthy. Girl loses weight. Girl is happy.**

**But what happens to that girl five, six or seven years later?**

**My name is Nikki, and I'm that girl.**

### Making the Change

Like I said, my journey to bariatric surgery in 2008 isn't that extraordinary. I struggled with my weight my entire life. I like to say I was a large baby, who grew into a large child, who grew into a large teenager, who became a large woman. That wasn't necessarily problematic in my mind because all the women I knew and admired throughout my childhood were women of size, and none of them let their size stop them from doing anything they wanted to do.



*Nikki Massie has been a member of the OAC since 2014, and is the creator of the popular food blog, [www.BariatricFoodie.com](http://www.BariatricFoodie.com).*

I think my size became a big problem after I had kids. Up until then, I stayed at around 250 pounds and that didn't stop me from doing much. But after two pregnancies, I weighed more than 340 pounds. My body ached, and my joints ached. I could barely stand to look in the mirror or take pictures. I didn't like being touched. I knew I had a problem, but I didn't exactly know how to solve it yet.

I'd heard about bariatric surgery, but I didn't really learn much about it until a friend of mine asked me to go to a bariatric seminar as her moral support. So we sat in the middle of a crowded hospital auditorium as a series of surgeons showed diagrams of anatomy before and after various surgeries. I even remember an actual Lap-Band device being passed around the room.

After the presentations, there was time for questions and it seemed everyone asked some variation of the same question — will I ever be able to eat “X” food again? After listening for a while, I decided to stand up and ask a question. I was scared, because before that moment I didn't even know I was interested in surgery, but still I asked — “If I have the surgery...will I really lose the weight?”

I didn't know it at that moment, but I was staring into the kind eyes of the man who would change my life forever. He smiled at me and in his characteristically soft voice replied,

“Yes, if you have the surgery and do the work, you will lose the weight.”

And that is how I decided to have bariatric surgery.

## Who's that Girl?

I'm pretty sure I was the most ill-prepared bariatric patient ever. I did all the requisite testing and I took a pre-operation education class, but that was about it. I didn't research. I didn't buy things to prepare – not even vitamins or protein. When I walked into that surgical center on January 8, 2008, I was flying blind in nearly every sense of the phrase.

From the moment I awakened from surgery, life has been one adventure after another. It didn't take me very long after surgery to realize two distinct things.

The first was exactly how much I'd neglected myself. Even when I was cleared to exercise, it was torture. Walking slowly on the treadmill felt like wading through quicksand. My body felt alien to me, unfamiliar. I didn't seem to know how it worked anymore.

The second thing I realized – and it's hard to explain how I didn't know this before – was that I am a food addict. The inability to eat large quantities was traumatic for me. Almost immediately, I began looking for ways to get more interaction with food, so I'd wander the aisles of grocery stores for hours (no, I'm not kidding) and watch the Food Network incessantly. But my mind still wasn't satisfied.

So I put all the mental space I used to fill with food into being a post-op perfectionist. I counted every calorie, carb and gram of protein that went into my body. I would compete with myself, day by day, to get as many grams of protein out of as few calories a day as possible. My personal best was 170 grams of protein out of 900 calories.



*Nikki Massie (second from left) enjoys time with new friends at the 2014 Your Weight Matters National Convention in Orlando, Fla.*

I worked out incessantly, sometimes leaving my kids in the gym daycare for hours on end.

In other words, I had gone from one eating disorder to another.

## Regain

It's a dirty word in bariatric circles but yes, I regained. Not all of my weight. Not even most of my weight, but I did regain.

Funny enough, the regain started as what we might call "bounce back weight." I gained about 10 pounds, and it scared me to death. So I worked out a little harder, ate a little less and hoped it'd go away. It didn't.

So then I got angry. I worked out even harder, and ate even less, demanding that it go away. It still didn't.

Finally, I felt resigned. I thought, "if I'm not going to lose weight, what's the point of eating right and exercising?" I affectionately call this period my "bariatric adolescence," because I rebelled big time – which caused a second, more significant, round of regain.

What pulled me back from that process was the realization that those behaviors – eating poorly, being sedentary – weren't who I was anymore. By this time I was a bariatric food blogger and I interacted with many post-ops every day. Whether I was at my smallest or largest, I very much wanted to be the person I said I was in my blog posts. If I said I was active, I wanted to be active. If I said I ate well most of the time, I wanted to eat well most of the time.

That's when things began to turn around.

## Individual Results Vary

As much as I'd love to tell you this story ends with me re-losing every pound I regained, I can't tell you that, and I'm actually not sorry! I'm a work in progress. Would I love to lose more weight? Sure, but would I still love and value myself if I didn't? Most definitely.

I owe a big part of this newfound self-acceptance to the Obesity Action Coalition. I attended my first *Your Weight Matters* National Convention in Phoenix, Arizona in 2013. To say I was blown away by the conference was an understatement. I became absorbed in the educational sessions, and with experts who told me that there wasn't just one weight-loss narrative, there are many.

In the social settings, I felt welcome. In the fitness sessions, I felt invited. It seemed like every detail of the convention existed to affirm my commitment to live a healthy and balanced life.

During my second convention, in Orlando, Fla., I participated in the OAC's National Advocacy Training session. Again, I was flabbergasted. You mean...I don't have to put up with the tasteless jokes leveled against people living with obesity? I have the right to request accommodations in doctor's offices and other places to be able to treat me effectively?



*Nikki Massie and OAC Board Member Michelle Vicari participate in the OAC's Advocacy March to Washington, DC at the 4th Annual Your Weight Matters National Convention.*

Most importantly, I have the right to say to the world that the "F-Word" does not define me. Being a person living with obesity is simply one part of who I am, and the OAC gave me the voice to convey that.

This is why I must support the OAC. Not only because the organization fits well with my values and works to support the 90 million people living with obesity in the U.S., but also as an investment. It's my investment — in a world free of weight bias. A world where obesity is treated like a disease, and where every patient has access to safe, affordable, adequate and evidence-based care.

I'm proud to say I was the first recurring donor for the organization! That means that by filling out a simple form, I allow the OAC to deduct a monthly donation right from my bank account. I just set it and forget it, but that doesn't mean I forget about the work the OAC does.

And that's where I am now. I weigh far less than when I had surgery, and significantly more than my lowest weight, but guess what? That's not what matters.

What matters is that I am an active participant in my own life. What matters is that I look in the mirror and I smile at myself. What matters is that I give and accept hugs with ease.

I'm not sure how, but somewhere in the middle of this crazy journey – of living with obesity, having surgery, discovering my food addiction, losing weight and regaining weight – I seem to have found some balance and a sense of self-worth that makes me wake up every day and choose myself first.

And that is a story worth telling.



# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



**JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](http://OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN)**

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