

Education Matters
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OAC MEMBERS
MATTER

A Web of Challenges and Triumphs

by Rob Portinga

It can be odd how our memories work, and how outside forces can have an influence on how we perceive and feel about ourselves. As a young adult, I remember feeling teased a lot when I was a kid, and since I was larger than most of my peers, I think I grew up associating all of that primarily with my weight. Looking back at childhood photos, I don't look as heavy as I remember feeling. But it felt very real at the time. And despite doing things like little league sports and such, I never truly felt a part of the "team" and would often spend hours alone, escaping into the world of comic books. My favorite by far was always Spider-Man, and little did I know the impact this would actually have on me later in life.

Soon my reality did catch up to my perception. I was 300 pounds by the time I was 30-years-old, and spent my early 30s riding that diet rollercoaster up and down. During this time, I was somewhat active; playing paintball, going camping, hiking or even just crawling around on the floor with my young niece and nephew. I maybe wasn't the fastest one on the field or the trail, but I was out there, doing things I enjoyed. However, after a particularly painful time in my life, I soon ended up at my heaviest weight somewhere between 380 and 390 pounds, and the additional weight started putting a damper on those things. It was also having more and more of an impact on my health. I had been on hypertension medication for more than 15 years, but with those additional pounds, medication was having less and less of an effect. I was also diagnosed with sleep apnea, where I was stopping breathing nearly 70 times an hour.



While the effort of just getting out on the field had been keeping me from playing paintball for a bit, I was still going out there with my friends, socializing and taking photos. And it was on the paintball field that it finally hit me. My friend Larry had always been able to run circles around me on the field, and here he was still playing, and he was in his early 60s, nearly 20 years older than me. It dawned on me, if I didn't do something, not only was I not going to be out there playing paintball when I was Larry's age, there was a very real chance I wouldn't make it to Larry's age.

I had known about bariatric surgery, but I had not considered it an option. It seemed drastic, and after all, I "knew" what I needed to do. I just had to do it. And as a guy, no way was I going to ask for help, I should be able to do it on my own, right? Well, I came to the realization that I couldn't. A family member and a couple other people I knew were having success after bariatric surgery, so I made the decision to ask my doctor what he thought about it, and after years of trying to get me to do something about my weight, he was all for it.

I had my first appointment in October of 2008, and I was ready and raring to go. Of course, I had the usual pre-op requirements to meet, including losing some weight. I followed the plan given to me by my nutritionist, and I lost the 21 pounds they were asking for in the weeks between

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Thanksgiving and Christmas and kept going. By the end of January, I was down about 40 pounds and was starting to re-think my decision to have surgery. But like so many others, I had been down this road too many times before, and moving ahead to gain the additional help surgery would provide just seemed like the right thing to do.

I had gastric bypass surgery on April 8, 2009, and it is a decision that changed nearly every aspect of my life. Whether real or self-imposed, I had let my weight keep me on the sidelines during much of my life. As the weight came off, I started finding a new purpose. Recognizing that there were so few guys out there that were willing to reach out for the help bariatric surgery provides, I decided to start blogging about my experience. And as things progressed for me, I became more and more involved in various online bariatric communities, doing bariatric-friendly cooking videos, participating in online forums and attending bariatric events across the country.

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It was at one of these events in 2010 that I met a couple of board members from the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) and the organization's President and CEO, Joe Nadglowski. The ideals behind the OAC seemed solid, so I became a member. In late 2010, I was laid off from my job in construction management. In trying to decide what I was going to do next, a friend suggested taking the things I did in the bariatric community and find a way to do some work in helping others get healthier. The idea was very appealing, and I found some online nutrition-related classes and made the decision to try and become a health coach.



Rob poses for a picture while bike riding.

While I'm still working on turning that part of things into an actual business for myself, it has led to so many other opportunities. The following spring I was asked to join some other homeopathic practitioners as one of the hosts for The Wake Up Call, a health and wellness radio program we developed and have been doing on AM Radio in the Minneapolis area for nearly three years now. I was not at all sure I had what it took to be a part of something like this, but the "new" me was determined to find out and not look back later and wonder, "What if?" It was through that radio show that I started increasing my relationship with the OAC. One of my early shows was on weight bias, with Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA, OAC Chairman, as my guest.

The more I learned about the work the OAC was doing, the more I knew I wanted to be a part of it. It's an organization I have really come to feel is doing good, and one where I really feel like I can make a positive impact.

OAC Membership Categories

(select one)

- Individual Membership: \$20/year
- Institutional Membership: \$500/year
- Chairman's Council Membership: \$1,000+/year

OAC Membership Add-ons

Add-on 1: Educational Resources

To order bulk copies of OAC resources, members can purchase educational packages. If you'd like to order resources, select one of the below packages.

- Standard Package**
10-50 pieces/quarter \$50
- Deluxe Package**
51-100 pieces/quarter \$100
- Premium Package**
101-250 pieces/quarter \$150

Add-on 2: Make a General Donation

Make a tax-deductible donation to the OAC when joining as a member. Your donation helps the OAC's educational and advocacy efforts.

- \$5
- \$10
- \$25
- \$50
- \$100
- Other _____

Membership/Add-on Totals:

Membership Category: \$ _____
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Contact Information

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- Check (payable to the OAC) for \$ _____.
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And this is where the influence reading those comic books throughout my life really started to come to fruition. There is an iconic line from the Spider-Man comics that essentially says, "With great power, comes great responsibility." Throughout his history, this is a point that comes to bear on Spider-Man over and over. And it's one I have taken to heart in my own life.



Rob talking to his listeners on his radio show.

I don't have super strength, I can't cling to walls, but that doesn't mean I don't have great power. I have a voice, and a story to share. These various venues provide me a sort of power and way to reach others, and I have come to realize it is my responsibility to make use of them in a positive manner that will potentially help others. First it was through blogging and online videos, then through my radio show and public speaking, and now I continue to try and find more ways to help spread a message of health.

James Zervios, OAC Director of Communications, has been a part of that as we use tools like Google Hangouts and YouTube to discuss obesity-related topics. And of course, I use the radio show as much as possible to plug the OAC, including running their *Your Weight Matters* Campaign PSAs and doing a radio show on advocacy with Joe Nadglowski, OAC President and CEO.

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Working with the OAC these last couple of years, I've realized how I can increase my powers to reach folks with a message that benefits many. Since attending my first *Your Weight Matters* Convention last year in Phoenix, I was honored to be invited to go to Washington, DC, with the OAC last fall to take my story to our legislators in the hopes of making changes to the way obesity is viewed. Then I was invited to join the planning committee for this year's YWM2014 Convention and also asked to be a part of the OAC's Weight Bias Committee.

I truly feel that I have been fortunate to have had the opportunities I've been given, and the power that's been placed in my hands because of them. And I feel fortunate that I've found ways to use that power to make a difference. But even more so, I continue to be in awe of and inspired by the ways I see others involved with the OAC make use of the power they have, from the staff and Board, on down to other members. It makes for an organization, a movement and a community that I am proud to be a part of.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE.



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**



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