

Education Matters
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OAC MEMBERS
MATTER

FINDING MY VOICE

by Tammy Beaumont, RN, BSN, CBN

It was June 2003 when I sat skeptically in a weight-loss surgery informational seminar, that the light bulb came on, and I knew my life was about to change. What I didn't know at the time was how dramatically my world was about to be rocked, and how everything I believed about what I wanted in life was about to be rewritten.

After surgery, I knew almost immediately that my nursing career path was going to shift so that I could work with patients going through what I'd gone through with my weight. I quickly realized, though, that being a patient, even a successful one, didn't qualify me to work in the field of bariatrics. After spending my first year post-op thriving on the high of the "honeymoon phase" and working month after month with my program's support group, it was time to start putting my personal success to the test and start working on some formal education for my professional growth. In 2005, I spent (or rationalized as "invested") almost \$3,000 to send myself to my first American Society of Bariatric Surgery (now American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery) conference.

It must have been fate that with so many participants I managed to run into a fellow bariatric patient from my program back in Dallas. She was a nurse practitioner working for a bariatric surgeon. She introduced me to her surgeon who just happened to be looking for a coordinator for his program. As I soaked in all the education I could muster, I also spent a lot of time perusing the exhibits. Among all the vitamin and protein supplements, I came across a booth for the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC). With so many booths to explore I took their literature, signed-up for emails and moved along. The rest as they say, "is history!"



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A few weeks later, I received an email from the OAC. The email stated, "Welcome to the premiere issue of the *Obesity Action Alert*, the Obesity Action Coalition's free electronic newsletter." Along the side border it said, "The OAC, a newly formed independent non-profit organization, is designed to educate and advocate on behalf of those living with or affected by obesity." The feature article was titled "OAC Launches National Campaign" and went on to say,

"The OAC is excited to launch its national *Raise Your Voice* membership campaign. Designed to enhance the voice of those personally affected by or who have an interest in obesity, the *Raise Your Voice* campaign seeks to build a nationwide coalition of patients, family members and professionals to proactively get involved in helping educate and advocate on behalf of the millions impacted by obesity. Now is the perfect time to join our efforts as a member of the OAC."

What's funny is that in trying to remember back to the timeline of my joining the OAC, I found the actual August 2005 email in my weight-loss surgery file along with the receipt for the \$20 I paid that same day for my membership. Something about that first email made me think this is an organization that will make a difference. Looking back just over eight years now, I've come to find out that not only was it a newly formed organization, but I was actually member number seven! I can honestly say I started on the ground floor with this organization!

For the first several years, I read the OAC's emails religiously. I was deep into developing my new career and moved quickly from working in a practice to starting up

a new program at a local hospital. I was developing new relationships in the Dallas/Fort Worth bariatric community, actively participating in the organization of our local *Walk from Obesity*, meeting the staff from the OAC at each year's ASMBS meeting, and even became one of the original nurses to sit for and receive the first ever Certified Bariatric Nurse designation in 2007. But something was missing. It wasn't until I started in my current position at Methodist Dallas Medical Center that I started getting out into the community and started promoting health and wellness and my hospital's Weight Management Institute that I first saw my true passion bloom.

When I was out in the community, I realized I was really making an impact on the people I was speaking to each day. I saw the amazement in their faces when they realized I wasn't just like every other medical professional trying to tell them to eat less and exercise more. They saw that I had left behind the 266 pounds to live a life dedicated to fueling and nourishing my body. They realized that I wasn't just "talking the talk" but rather "walking the walk" right along with them.

At the same time, I was getting to know my fellow OAC members and staff better. I'd like to think they saw what I was feeling and was honored when they asked me to submit an application to become a member of the OAC Advisory Board (and most recently was asked to fill a mid-term vacancy on the OAC National Board of Directors). I was paying more attention to how the media represented those affected by obesity. All of a sudden I wasn't afraid to challenge and correct people when they used demeaning statements. I was surprised, honored and a bit terrified when they then asked me to participate in the 2011 Day on the Hill event. For this, we were to meet with our state's legislative offices to discuss how obesity needed to be included as part of the essential benefits package of healthcare reform. Speaking within my community was one thing, speaking on Capitol Hill – THAT was overwhelming!

Having confidence in myself was never my strong suit, but the words came easily as I related my personal life experiences with why we needed weight management coverage. I left Washington, DC, that day knowing that

I'd just "turned to the dark side" and become a fearless Washington advocate!

As I said in the beginning, I never imagined the extent of the changes that were going to take place both physically and emotionally – especially in how I viewed standing up for and speaking out for what I believed in.

The OAC has given me that voice, and the confidence to use it. Our local Fox affiliate now calls on me to comment on subjects like the recent Boy Scouts of America issue of banning scouts from the national jamboree based on body mass index, or the recent American Medical Association announcement declaring obesity a disease. By the time you read this, I will have already been on my second Day on the Hill event to help encourage more legislators to support the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act of 2013.

To say that my life changed would be an understatement! My next goal is to somehow incorporate working with physicians on how to approach the sensitive subject of one's weight with patients who may or may not be ready to hear it. How or when that will happen is uncertain but as Walt Disney said, "If you can dream it, you can do it." What I do know though is that none of this would have occurred without that chance encounter at the OAC booth and that 2005 email encouraging us to "Raise Your Voice!"



Tammy poses in her beach-themed costume for the Your Weight MattersSM Convention Costume Contest.

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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

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