

Education Matters
Advocacy Matters
Support Matters

OAC MEMBERS
MATTER

Be the Change You Wish to See in the World

by Michelle Mata

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

I have always read and heard this quote for as long as I can remember and could never even imagine that I can make a change in my own life, let alone in the world.

I started working in the mental health field as a Peer Advocate around 2006. I was advocating and learning about new things available for people living with mental illnesses. I remember traveling from Austin, Texas to Athens, Greece, doing things such as talking to our legislators about bills, learning new and innovative ways to help people on their road to recovery and helping to change how mental health services and peer-led services were being rendered or utilized. It felt good to be able to do something that was going to help me and people in my home state. Although I am proud to have been a part of that, I think I am most proud of the work I have been doing this past year.

I make an impact in my own community with people I know personally, my peers. I began working with a non-profit and doing some advocacy work with the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Training. I started learning that I was somebody with a strong voice. For years, I was told I would never amount to anything and that I was a failure. I felt worthless and being affected by obesity made things challenging for me as an adult. I was average weight as a child and not impacted by obesity. I was an okay student, but I remember I was bullied at school. But to tell you the truth, I don't really know why I was bullied, and I didn't really care.



What I was really more concerned about was the abuse I was enduring every day of my childhood until I left home and severed all contact with my family at about the age of 18. Once I left, I knew I needed to keep myself safe from any further abuse. For me, I thought if I gained weight; people would not want to touch me or be around me. People would not want to bother a fat girl. This sounded like the only logical thing at the time. So, I ate; I ate because I was happy, I ate because I was sad, bored, anxious, because everyone else was eating. I ate because I didn't want to waste food. Food became my comfort and being fat became my safety net. My life went on, but as I gained weight, I became depressed and I lost myself in it. I was working and going to school full time and taking care of my two children. As I ate, I got bigger and bigger and started having some health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure and sleeping issues. I guess you can say I was safe from anyone hurting me – I just never thought about the things I could do to hurt myself. I never thought that I can abuse my own body and that is exactly what I was doing.

I was told by one of my doctors that I needed to lose weight or I would die before I was 40. I tried losing weight on my own and tried all the fad diets that I could afford and I would lose some weight but gained it all back and more. I started hearing more and more about bariatric surgery and that people were losing hundreds of pounds and their diabetes was gone and blood pressure was normal and they felt better and were able to do things they stopped

doing because of the weight. I started researching bariatric surgery and the different options. After doing my research, I found that the gastric banding was the right option for me. I found a surgeon and started the process and found the resources I needed to get some support. The nutritionist at my surgeon's office gave me information about the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) and I became a member in 2009. I had gastric band surgery in December and then attended the Inaugural *Your Weight Matters* National Convention in 2012 in Dallas. I was so excited and also scared to attend by myself, but determined to go. I started planning. I saved money and made reservations and even planned on seeing some friends in Ft. Worth while I was in Dallas for YWM2012.

As YWM2012 neared, I started getting scared. What would people say or think about me? What will I say or do, I didn't know anyone there. Well, as I started meeting people and talking to them I realized that they had the same struggles as I had. It felt great to be around people that didn't care about my weight. All that mattered was that I was working on getting myself healthier and that I was learning things and finding new resources I never knew before. I started to feel confident and feeling confident in my own skin while I was working on getting healthier. I was okay with being me, the person I knew, that had been hiding in her fatness. I learned so much from the OAC Convention about different weight-loss options, motivation to lose weight, exercise, eating healthier or cooking differently or choosing the right foods. I learned that I matter. I matter at any size. I am somebody and that what I have to say, or the advocacy work I do, is important, and I can make a difference in people's lives.

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After the Convention, I started working on my advocacy work more passionately and during the presentations, I became more comfortable standing in front of an audience of law enforcement officers, public transit police, child protective services workers, social workers, student nurses and anyone else that have direct contact with someone in a mental health crisis. My advocacy work doing presentations is about sharing my life experiences living with a mental illness. I help to educate them on how to approach me, maybe what to say or what not to say. I also answer any questions they may have so that they can understand what is going on in my head or why I behave in a certain way. I share my dark days living with a mental illness, my acceptance of my diagnosis, my treatment plans of my mental illness, the coping skills I utilize on a daily or weekly basis, and I share all of my success, hopes and dreams. After each section, I open it up to questions and answers. I answer the questions as honestly as I can.



Michelle Mata dancing during the OAC Annual Awards Dinner.

I tell them how I would want to be treated if I was ever in a mental health crisis again. People that respond to a mental health crisis usually only see the person at their worst. I help to show them that people diagnosed with a mental illness do recover and that we can lead happy lives.

The best part of my presentation is reminding them that just because I have a diagnosis, does not negate the fact that I am human. I have rights and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect – just as if their loved-ones were diagnosed and in a crisis. I help them remember that there

is still a person with hopes and dreams still living inside. I show them the positive side of a person living with a mental illness. I help to put a face to people living with a mental illness. I am a mother, sister, friend, community member, voter, volunteer, trainer – a human living with a mental illness.

The diagnosis of a mental illness does not define me, it is not who I am. It is something I live with. My diagnosis and the advocacy work I do help make an impact for those living with a mental illness. It helps me educate people on how to respond and treat people living with a mental illness. I find it strange that someone diagnosed with a mental illness during a crisis can be arrested and sent to jail instead of getting the help they need. If someone in a medical crisis, say a heart attack, needs help, they go to the hospital and get medical help. They don't get arrested and sent to jail. But a person in a mental health crisis is arrested and may never get the mental health help they need to recover, thus perpetuating their situation. The cycle can just go on and on. This is where my advocacy work comes in, to help the trainees see that intervention is needed instead of handcuffs.

This is why I believe the way I was treated and what I learned at the Inaugural *Your Weight Matters* Convention helped me realize that my weight had no bearing on the work I was doing. My weight was never a factor in how what I was saying was going to be heard or not. It was my life story, my experiences, my voice that was going to make an impact or a difference.

One in four people are living with a mental illness. It is most likely that you know someone living with a mental illness. Think about it, if your own family member was diagnosed with a mental illness, the way you would want

them to be treated if they were in the middle of a crisis is the same way I want to be treated. I hope the work I do will normalize the idea that living with a mental illness is okay and that it is not anyone's fault. We don't deserve to go to jail or be criminalized just because we have a mental illness. We have rights and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and to receive appropriate mental health treatment.

In June 2014, I received a call from a non-profit organization in California asking if I would be willing to be filmed for a documentary about CIT Training and the advocacy work I do during their training with my presentations. I agreed to be filmed. I was going to be able to reach more people and help them help people living with a mental illness get the help they need. I don't think I would have ever agreed if it were not for the Obesity Action Coalition's Inaugural Convention in 2012. If I had not attended the Convention, I don't think I would have gotten the call let alone agreed to be filmed. I gained so much since attending. If the first *Your Weight Matters* Convention gave me so much, I can't wait to see what the next few years will give me. I am ready to make an even bigger difference. I don't know what or how it will look, but I am ready.

I love the work I do and will continue it with all my passion. I will continue working on myself, my weight-loss, exercising, eating right and doing the things that make me feel happy. I still have a mental illness and will forever. But I know that with my friends, family, peers, my treatment and my work, I can overcome those challenges. The path I make for myself is mine to make on my journey in life. We all, every one of us, face obstacles. It is overcoming the obstacles that makes us who we are. My hope is to cope with my diagnosis and finding what is right for me. I still struggle with things in my life, but I have found that if I want my life to be fulfilling, I need to love myself, continue advocating and staying positive. For me, having a healthy mind is just as important as having a healthy body.

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"Be the change you wish to see in the world." The quote I will forever remember. I never thought I could or would ever make a difference in the world. I make a difference every time I share my story. If you want to change something or make a difference in your own life, start small.

ONE SMALL CHANGE CAN MAKE A BIG 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**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

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