

Education Matters
Advocacy Matters
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OAC MEMBERS
MATTER

Changing **ONE** **MIND** at a Time

by Patty Nece, JD



Photo courtesy of
Lee Halvorsen Photography

Back in December 2012, I was meeting friends at a swanky Washington, DC, restaurant for a holiday dinner. I arrived before them and was seated. The restaurant was busy; most tables were occupied. I felt conspicuous sitting there alone because everyone else had dining companions. As I waited, a little voice in my head started chanting familiar refrains. *“Everyone is looking at you and thinking you’re alone because you’re so fat. They think you’re ugly and no one wants to be with you. They think you’re disgusting.”* These thoughts were pretty common in my life. But then came the surprise. A still smaller voice was saying to me: *“I’m worthless. I’m a joke. I’m a failure.”*

Hearing that smaller voice was an important breakthrough for me. After talking to myself like this for decades, I had simply stopped listening. That doesn’t mean I stopped saying deeply negative things to myself. I hadn’t. But I was finally able to hear them again. That was one of the best Christmas presents I had ever received.

You see, I’ve suffered from obesity my entire life. I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t overweight. I was a very active kid. I swam, did gymnastics and rode my bike every day. Yet I was always overweight. My obesity worsened as I moved through adolescence and into adulthood, when it became very severe. Along with the

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obesity came a lifetime of teasing, bullying and ridicule, all because of my weight.

Like many of us, I tried diet after diet, and all of them failed in the long run. None of them worked for more than a nanosecond. I always regained everything I lost, and added more to boot. And every time I failed, I felt more and more ashamed of myself for not being able to manage my weight. I call it my “spiral of shame” that sent me out of control when it came to eating.

Friends and family—even when well meaning—medical professionals, the media, and society in general reinforced my feelings of shame and failure. I bought into the hype: Losing weight was all about willpower and entirely in my control. And it was OK to make jokes about people with obesity because, well, we deserved it.

I gave up on losing weight—and myself—for many years. I was defeated. Continuing to carry an extra 200 pounds was somehow easier than facing the shame of failing again.

But then a cousin of mine who had suffered from obesity for most of her life lost over 100 pounds and kept it off. She encouraged me to try again. So I started looking for a science-based treatment program in the Washington, DC, area.

That's when I met Dr. Scott Kahan and his team at the National Center for Weight and Wellness (NCWW). Little did I know then how much that meeting would change my health and my life.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't being judged for my weight. Instead, Scott taught me about obesity's complexities, like how your body fights against weight-loss and the many hormones involved in that fight. He also began showing me the negative impact of our food environment, and how difficult the environment makes weight management.

Slowly, I realized that my weight wasn't a result of some personality flaw or a lack of willpower. That dealing with my condition involved much more than simply eating less and exercising more. I finally



Patty poses for a picture with OAC Chairwoman, Amber Huett-Garcia, MPA



Patty and her friend, Jamie Bazen, pose for a picture near the Chicago waterfront.

understood that I didn't choose to have obesity any more than someone chooses to have cancer.

For me, figuring out *why* I eat has been just as important as any changes I've made to what I eat. By the time of that fateful December dinner, Dr. Robyn Osborn had taught me the importance of uncovering my negative self-talk. The deep stuff. The stuff you don't talk about with anyone. She also taught me how to challenge those thoughts. Was I *really* worthless or a failure just because I was overweight? Of course not!

With the NCWW team's help and support, and some hard, soul-searching work, I've lost 110 pounds and maintained it for a couple of years now. I'd like to lose more and continue to work at it; I still haven't figured it all out! But I've experienced an even more important outcome than a lower weight. My outlook on life and my self-esteem have soared now that I've shed most of the shame I've felt about my weight throughout my life.

My weight management journey served as a call to action for me. I recognized the toll years of fat-shaming and weight bias had taken on me. I had no idea how accustomed I had gotten to it, even to the point of accepting offensive comments and ridicule as par for the course. I also began seeing stigma displayed by medical professionals, often blaming patients with obesity for their weight instead of treating it constructively.

So when Scott asked me to participate in a roundtable with the STOP Obesity Alliance at the George Washington University School of Public Health, I decided it was time for my voice to be heard. A few weeks later, I found myself testifying with OAC's President and CEO Joe Nadglowski and others before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration about the need for more evidence-based obesity treatments.

From there I allowed my voice to grow. I've shared my story with policy makers, legislators, doctors, medical students, nutritionists, food-industry representatives and others. I speak out against weight bias because I believe debunking the myths about people with obesity is the first step toward understanding. I've also spoken about the need for more treatments and broad insurance coverage for valid ones. And I serve as a member of OAC's Weight Bias Committee.

By using the power of my voice, I've learned that a lot of good, well-meaning people simply don't recognize weight bias or the damage it does to those of us with obesity. I can't blame them. Weight bias is ubiquitous in our society; it passes without notice. These folks gasp when I tell them about being called any one of a number of different mammals. Or they stare in disbelief when I talk about a physician who failed to examine me because he was so certain my pain was solely caused by my weight. (He was wrong, by the way.) It's these people we need to educate and ask to take a stand with us in challenging weight bias wherever it exists.

Raising my voice has also empowered me in my own weight management journey. I finally feel in control of my own health and my own life. I no longer slip into that spiral of shame I constructed over decades.

Has the advocacy work I've done made a difference? I hope so. It's important that we continue sending the message that weight bias is plain wrong to media outlets, government officials, medical professionals, business interests and to friends and family members. I know I'm in it for the long run, even if it means changing one mind at a time.

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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**



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