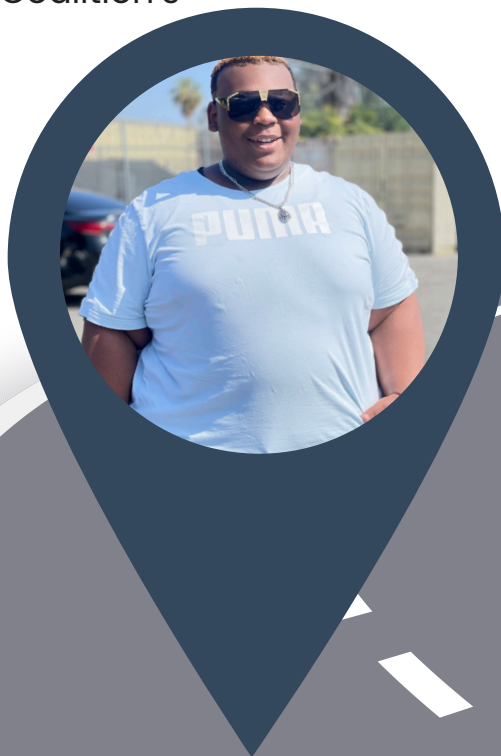


NAVIGATING ADOLESCENT OBESITY: *John's Journey*

by OAC Staff Members Kendall Griffey and Michelle "Shelly" Vicari

In a world that often fails to recognize the unique challenges faced by adolescents affected by obesity, John Simon III's story stands as a testament to resilience, expert guidance and the transformative power of a supportive community. From the depths of physical and emotional suffering to the empowering halls of the Obesity Action Coalition's *Your Weight Matters* Convention, John's journey is a beacon of hope for those navigating the complexities of adolescent obesity.



HEALTH CHALLENGES AND BULLYING

Growing up, John faced numerous health challenges caused by excess weight, including non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), prediabetes and severe sleep apnea. The toll on his daily life was profound, with everyday activities causing pain and emotional distress. Unable to enjoy walks on the beach or navigate a mall without discomfort, John's world had become a place of limitations where he could no longer enjoy the things he used to.

Not only did John experience physical pain, but he also faced cruel and relentless bullying from his peers. Going to school became so unbearable that he ended up falling three grades behind.

Determined to improve his health and well-being, John and his mother, Karen Tillman, embarked on a treatment path. First attempting various weight-loss strategies, like dieting and coaching, John began to lose some excess weight. But, despite initial successes, the challenges were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to weight regain and heightened mental health struggles. It was during this time that Karen sought guidance from their family of retired pro athletes, forming a supportive community that focused on daily activities, outdoor walks and cooking lessons.



A BRAVE STEP TOWARD A NEW BEGINNING

Even with all of these efforts, John's weight was still a concern. John's pediatrician introduced the possibility of bariatric surgery. Thorough research, collaborative discussions, and trust in medical expertise led to the decision that surgery was the best path forward in John's case. Despite initial apprehensions, both John and Karen recognized the potential for a life-changing transformation through surgery. So, at age 14, John underwent bariatric surgery.

John remembers feeling a little bit scared but mostly excited to undergo bariatric surgery. With his mother as his biggest advocate and his doctor, who became more like a mentor, by his side, he was confident the surgery was going to change his life for the better.

LIFE AFTER BARIATRIC SURGERY

His life post-bariatric surgery was challenging at first. There are major life changes that come along with it, and a lot of rules to remember and follow. Karen remembers John's phone alarm going off every 30 minutes to remind him to drink or eat. But with time, they got used to the routine. Plus, with continuous support from his family, church and community, including a neighbor providing private exercise training, John has been able to embrace a new, healthier lifestyle. "They gave him the strength to keep going," Karen said of John's support system.

Now, a few of John's favorite pastimes post-surgery are exercising and healthy cooking! His favorite workouts are weightlifting and boxing. John's uncle, a retired pro-boxer who won the Olympic gold medal in 1984 and once fought Mike Tyson, taught him how to box!

John's newfound love for cooking not only contributed to his physical well-being but also became a creative outlet. Karen raves about John's cooking skills, emphasizing how he transformed into the "best healthy cooker there is!" Initially overwhelmed by the rules of healthy cooking, John now navigates the kitchen with confidence, demonstrating that mastering a healthier lifestyle involves both education and personal exploration.

John experienced a significant 200-pound weight-loss in just over a year. He reports feeling better than ever and is able to participate in the activities he enjoys again. But beyond the physical transformation, John's mental health journey is equally noteworthy. Post-surgery, John faced the challenging process of catching up on schoolwork and overcoming the mental health toll of past bullying. The switch to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity for John to focus on his education and emotional recovery. He has also been able to make new friends.



“ I want to help other kids. ”

A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

As Karen reflected on her journey as a parent, she expressed the need for shared experiences and stories. As a single parent, Karen was scared when they first began this journey with John. Looking back, Karen wishes she knew other parents of children who underwent bariatric surgery so they could tell her that everything was going to be okay. "I had no parent to share their experience with me, so I had to go through it alone." Now, she shares her experience because she wants families who are considering seeking obesity treatment to know that they are not alone in their journey. Karen also stressed the importance of setting realistic expectations and the necessity of providing tools for the entire family to embark on a healthier lifestyle together.

John also wants families to understand that they are not alone. One day, John met a boy at his school who was affected by obesity and whose parents helped him use a wheelchair to get to and from classes. John noticed the boy was being bullied by his classmates, so he decided to introduce himself to the boy and his parents to share his journey. "The least I can do is tell my story to other people and spread the word," John said.

THE KEY TO JOHN'S SUCCESS? EDUCATION, COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT

While the unwavering support of his family, especially his mother Karen, has been crucial, John's success also stems from support networks beyond the household. His neighbors, his church, his doctor and his new friends have all helped him in navigating the multifaceted challenges of adolescent obesity. John also shared how the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) has played a pivotal role in his journey, providing a safe and educational space through the *Your Weight Matters* Convention that John and Karen attended last Fall.

The OAC's *Your Weight Matters* Convention became a turning point in John's life. Attending as one of 13 families in the Empower Early Program, John and Karen were welcomed into a supportive community. Karen described it as the best experience she had ever witnessed – a blessing that transformed their lives.

John's experience at this year's Convention not only solidified the importance of community support in overcoming the challenges of obesity but also inspired his career aspirations. Initially, he wanted to be an automotive engineer, but John's exposure to the world of obesity treatment at the Convention reshaped his goals. "I've had my journey with bariatric surgery, and now I want to help other kids," John said.



AN EMPOWERING STORY STILL UNFOLDING

With a renewed passion for health, aspirations of becoming a doctor and a commitment to advocacy, John Simon's story is a beacon of hope and inspiration for others facing similar challenges. From overcoming health issues to becoming a skilled chef and spreading awareness about the benefits of surgery, John's transformation is awe-inspiring.

As John continues his journey, he remains supported by his family, community, and the lessons learned during the *Your Weight Matters* Convention. The OAC's ongoing support, educational resources, advocacy efforts and community engagement play an essential role in ensuring that John's success is not just a singular achievement but part of a broader movement toward healthier futures for adolescents dealing with obesity. As John's story unfolds, it becomes a roadmap for empowering individuals to share their stories and create positive change.

Do you want to join the OAC in making an impact for adolescents like John? Consider making a donation at obesityaction.org/donate

About the Authors:

Kendall Griffey, OAC Communications Manager, graduated from the University of North Florida with a BS in Communications with a focus in public relations. Kendall is passionate about her work in the non-profit sector and is driven to make a meaningful impact.

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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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