

Education **Matters**
Advocacy **Matters**
Support **Matters**

OAC Members
MATTER



Sarah Bramlette (right) poses with OAC Board Member Michelle Vicari (left) at the *Walk from Obesity* hosted during the *Your Weight Matters Inaugural Convention*.

The Part I Want: *Advocate*

by Sarah Bramlette, OAC Member since 2012

***“Dress for the part you want,
not the part you have.”***

Stunned by what I heard, I sat silently in disbelief. My emotions went from feelings of hurt to anger to frustration. Well-meaning advice? Or veiled discrimination?

Here was my question: “What skills and experiences should I focus on improving in order to advance in the company?”

That reply was the FIRST and only piece of advice and sounded as if I was being judged on my appearance, not on my skills or talents. My appearance equated to my weight. I am super morbidly obese; I have lipedema and lymphedema, conditions that cause excess adipose tissue and lymph fluid to accumulate in my arms and legs. The hurt, anger and frustration stemmed from years of challenges I had overcome in order to be a contributing member of society and yet, once again I found I was being discriminated against based on my weight.

Throughout my life, my weight did not matter, that is, I never let my weight keep me from doing what I wanted or being the person I was. I learned to accommodate for my weight, and I did so very well. In school, I was in plays, band, choir, traffic scout, after school activities, talented and gifted program and had many friends. I walked to school, played outside, rode my bike, and I had a paper route. Looking back, I had few negative experiences related to my weight, and the few I did have, I easily brushed off as non-important.

However, as my weight increased it became more difficult to accommodate. During college, I weighed more than 400 pounds. It became more difficult to walk across campus, and I found myself not going to classes located in buildings too difficult to walk to or find comfortable seating. While I was excelling in many leadership positions on campus, my grades and academic progress

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were suffering. I had excellent mentors who tried to support me and guide me, but I realized I had been ignoring a very important aspect of my life – my health. During this time, I was fired from my on campus job. When I asked why, I was advised: “Some people are judged as lazy because of their weight, it’s not right, but it happens. Sarah, I am here for you if you want to talk more about this.” The person saying this to me was not judging me; it was someone else in a position of power that made the decision. What this person does not know, was earlier that day I had seen a doctor for the first time in years because my weight had finally reached a point of scaring me. While at the doctor’s office, I was not able to put my shoes back on, so I shoved my feet half way in them enough to walk out to the car and was at work that night barefoot just acting like a co-worker who always worked without her shoes.

That was April 2000; I call it my rock bottom moment. I was unemployed, had not finished my education, and weighed more than 500 pounds. As much as I never let my weight keep me from doing what I wanted in life, I had also never made weight or health a priority. I had not yet been diagnosed with the lymphatic conditions. Doctors were telling me my gigantic painfully swollen legs were due to my weight.

My best friend was getting married in August, and I was in the wedding party. During a visit with her, she expressed her concern for my health. I wish I could remember word for word what she said because it was said so eloquently and spot on correctly. Trust me; I have heard that conversation attempted the wrong way so many times by others. I felt my secret was out, not that I thought people did not know I was affected by obesity, I just thought I was covering up the fact my weight affected me.

I had already started my journey with that visit to the doctor, and as I said, my weight finally began to scare me. The doctor offered few options. She did not even have a scale to weigh me. I proposed the idea for physical therapy as exercise, and I began supervised exercise in the therapy pool. I was able to weigh myself at a local junk yard that had a large capacity scale. I was finally diagnosed with lipedema and lymphedema and got proper compression therapy. I had gastric bypass surgery in April 2003.

Oh, yes, during all this, I also completed my bachelor’s degree.

I look back at that first experience of weight bias in the workplace as a positive experience, a much needed catalyst for change in my life. Years later, I met and thanked the man who had me fired. I told him that although I might not have agreed with his decision at the time, I now look back and see the very good thing it did for me. I finished my education, I got my life back

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About this NEW Member Feature Section

OAC Members are extraordinary people doing extraordinary things. With a rapidly growing membership and the success of our Inaugural Convention last year, the OAC has really had a chance to get to know many of our members on a personal level and hear the unique and extraordinary ways they are getting involved in making a difference.

Though our members share a common bond of being personally affected by obesity in some manner, we find that our members are actually very diverse. Each has unique passions and interests and ways that they want to give back to the cause. Some of our members are strong advocates, fighting for a variety of issues that directly impact fellow members such as ensuring individuals have access to obesity treatments. Then we have members who are dedicated to putting an end to weight bias, standing-up and demanding change and challenging public perceptions of individuals affected. And we have other members who are passionate messengers, committed to spreading needed education into communities. We also have members who provide support to others, someone to lean on and listen. The OAC has a truly unique membership comprised of passion, talent, knowledge and energy.

Our members are doing so many remarkable things that represent what the OAC stands for and it’s time that we share our members with the world. This new section of *Your Weight Matters Magazine* is dedicated to doing just that – sharing our members with one another and giving them a platform to share their purpose for getting more involved in the cause and the OAC.

It is our hope that our members can inspire you to get more involved, get connected and find how you want to contribute to the cause. We know each of you have a story to tell, not just about your journey, but where your journey has led you. That’s what this new section is all about and we are proud to now bring it direct to you through *Your Weight Matters Magazine* each quarter!



Join the Only Coalition of Individuals Affected by Obesity

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: \$ _____
 Add-on 1 (if applicable): +\$ _____
 Add-on 2 (if applicable): +\$ _____

TOTAL MEMBERSHIP PAYMENT: \$ _____

Contact Information

Name: _____
 Address: _____
 City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
 Phone: _____ Email: _____

Payment Information

- Check (payable to the OAC) for \$ _____.
- Credit card for my TOTAL membership payment of \$ _____.

- Discover®
- MasterCard®
- Visa®
- Amex®

Credit Card Number: _____
 Expiration Date: _____ Billing Zip Code: _____

RETURN TO:

Mail: OAC
 4511 North Himes Ave., Ste. 250
 Tampa, FL 33614

Fax: (813) 873-7838

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on track, I regained my health, I discovered I had a chronic condition and was able to get the correct treatment for it, and learn to manage it. I had a professional job and a future full of goals and dreams.

I cannot say the same for the most recent incident. More than 10 years later, I sat there with two college degrees, years of professional experience, management experience and leadership experience. My only weakness is I had recently changed careers from higher education to healthcare administration. I was willing and eager to learn. I was seeking feedback, so I could expand my skillset. My performance review ranked me as meeting above expectations but also mentioned that if I wanted to advance I needed to have a more "professional appearance." I believe I dressed professionally, despite the challenges faced being plus-sized and sensitivity in my arms and legs. However, to show I was serious about wanting to advance I changed my attire, and I was still passed up for a promotion. I could no longer stand by and tolerate this action against me. Sadly, the more I stood up for myself the harder they tried to knock me down.

On a positive note, this experience motivated me to get involved with the Obesity Action Coalition. I knew my story was powerful, and could help support the advocacy of ending weight bias in the workplace. I want to reinforce that a person's weight has no relation to the quality of their work. I have always worked 110% harder than my co-workers to try and overcome the "lazy" perception. I attended the Your Weight Matters National Convention Advocacy Training Day. I have decided the part I want is ADVOCATE.



Sarah Bramlette's Your Weight Matters Convention badge.

My story was not possible without the support of many people in my life. Their heartfelt concern for my wellbeing showed how much they truly cared for me as a person, even after all these years, memories of those talks brought tears to my eyes. I share my story so that others who find themselves in similar situations can find the strength to stand against weight stigma and bias. I encourage others to share their story, family member's story or friend's story.

What part do you want to have?

Share your story; our voices are louder together.

Perhaps you can be a support person for someone in their journey to a healthier life.

– Sarah Bramlette