Together, They Thrive: A Family's Journey

by Rachel Davidson, OAC Program Coordinator and Michelle "Shelly" Vicari, OAC Director of Programs

On the first day of the *Your Weight Matters* National Convention, Emma Grace Peeden was quiet. It was her first time attending, and as a seventh grader entering her teenage years, she was stepping into a new environment filled with unfamiliar people and conversations. She mostly kept to herself.



By the third day, something had changed. Emma Grace had come out of her shell, talking with others and becoming much more comfortable in the community around her. For Emma Grace, that change reflected something she and her older sister, Harleigh, have been learning over the past several years: Understanding your health can also mean learning to see yourself differently.

Emma Grace did not have to figure that out alone. Harleigh had already walked through those doors three times, supported along the way by a family committed to learning and growing together.

Finding People Who Understand



Harleigh first attended the *Your Weight Matters* National Convention in 2023 and has watched the Thrive Together program grow from its early days. Now 18 and beginning adulthood, she has several years of experience and lessons she can pass along to her younger sister.

Before finding Thrive Together, Harleigh did not always feel that the support she needed was available. Meeting other teens at the 2023 convention gave her something different: the chance to connect with young people who did not need an explanation of what she was experiencing. They already understood. Seeing their confidence and hearing how they responded to difficult situations helped Harleigh approach her own experiences differently. "It was different seeing teens that knew, and that had been going through the same thing that we have," she said.

One lesson has remained especially important to Harleigh: Obesity is a disease, not a definition of who someone is. She wants other young people to understand that their weight does not determine their personality, value or future. When someone shares a similar experience with her, she tries to make room for that person's story rather than assuming she already understands everything they have faced. Sometimes, she said, one conversation simply leads to another. That willingness to listen has become part of how she supports others.

Confidence Shared Between Sisters

This year, Harleigh returned as an ambassador for other teens, this time with her younger sister, Emma Grace, by her side. Drawing on the confidence she had gained over the years, Harleigh helped Emma Grace begin to find her own.

Before attending the convention, Emma Grace said bullying had affected how she felt about herself. Being surrounded by people who were welcoming and understanding helped her begin to see herself differently. One seemingly ordinary decision reflected that growing confidence. During the convention, Emma Grace wore shorts because she wanted to, something she had previously avoided. To others, the choice might have seemed small. For Emma Grace, it was another step toward feeling comfortable being herself.

The experience also created a special connection between two sisters at different stages of growing up. Harleigh has learned to stand up for herself, talk openly about her experiences and become more comfortable in her own skin. Emma Grace is just beginning to navigate some of those same challenges, but now she has someone close to home who understands.



Learning Together as a Family

Their parents, Roger and Amanda, are learning right alongside them. Roger has lived with obesity since he was young, yet he said he grew up without ever hearing obesity described as a disease. His understanding began to change when the family was introduced to the Thrive Together program and the *Your Weight Matters* National Convention.

"I'm 40 years old, and only in the last four to five years did I realize it's a disease," Roger said. "Watching your kids go through something that you went through is the hardest thing in life to me." He and Amanda have taken in a great deal during the family's three years of involvement. Sometimes, they attend a session and hear an idea they have heard before. They still listen. That sentiment captures much of the family's approach. They are not treating health as one person's challenge to solve. They are learning together, talking together and finding ways to carry those lessons home. When the family talked about what support looks like in their home today, Harleigh offered perhaps the simplest answer: "uplifting each other."

Our OAC Community

The circle of support is continuing to grow. The Peeden family considers the OAC Community part of its extended family, and they are already planning to return to the next *Your Weight Matters* National Convention with friends who are navigating their own experiences with weight. The support they found is now something they want to share with others.

Families can stay connected to Thrive Together throughout the year by signing up for the program's quarterly newsletter. Each issue shares trusted information, helpful resources, program updates, upcoming events and opportunities to learn about advocacy issues affecting families. It also offers ways for children, teens and parents to connect with the OAC Community and make their voices heard.

To learn more about the Thrive Together program and sign up for the quarterly newsletter, visit **ObesityAction.org/ThriveTogether.**

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OAC
Obesity Action Coalition

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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