

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

March 7, 2006

## Childhood obesity: Then & now

*4 kids profiled in series tell how battle with weight is going*

Janie Magruder

For many kids, the day's biggest challenge will be passing their math test, memorizing a piano piece or finding time for homework after soccer practice.

But for the one in three American kids who is overweight, life bears a heavier burden: Who will stare or make fun of them today? Why do they crave junk food? Why can't they move without getting short of breath? What is the extra weight doing to their long-term health?

"It's hard," says health professional Kim Demchak, whose caseload of obese children with symptoms of chronic illness has grown 50 percent in the past year. "It's hard if you don't have someone to help you."

Demchak, a pediatric nurse practitioner in Phoenix Children's Hospital's gastroenterology department, treats kids with fatty liver disease and Type 2 diabetes, conditions once seen only in adults. She gives parents advice on better nutrition and more exercise, and she doesn't mince words about the dangers of obesity.

"Kids don't understand the impact, and sometimes parents want to shield them and they don't want to talk about diabetes, metabolic syndrome, heart disease, joint problems," Demchak said. "But I tell them. I have to be blunt."

Childhood obesity has caught the attention of the American public, Demchak said, but not enough is being done to confront the epidemic. Schools still serve unhealthful foods because they sell well. Physical education isn't mandated in Arizona public schools and, in fact, has been cut in some districts. Parents routinely buy junk food in stores and restaurants because it's easy and their kids beg for it.

Addressing the problem involves commitment and consistency, Demchak said: cutting out soda, taking family walks, working together.

Last year, shortly after *The Arizona Republic* published a special report, "One in Three: Overcoming Childhood Obesity," staff at a south Phoenix clinic decided it had a responsibility, too.

About one-quarter of the kids seen at Mountain Park Health Center are overweight or obese, director Doug Hirano said. The clinic, along with the city of Phoenix, community and faith-based agencies and others, formed the South Phoenix Healthy Kids Partnership. Part of its mission is to convince the public that obesity is everyone's problem.

"Sometimes it's dismissed as a personal-responsibility issue, when the reality is it's a societal problem," Hirano said. "The number of overweight adolescents has tripled in the past 20 years, and that's not just the burden of kids whose parents are 'lazy.' It has to do with P.E. in schools, nutrition in cafeterias, the fixation with video games. We need to take it on as a society."

The children profiled in *The Republic's* report last year have had mixed success in their battles with obesity. Two declined to be interviewed for the story. Two others have lost a combined 310 pounds because they had help, one from a boarding school for obese children; the other from a bariatric surgeon.

These four agreed to talk:

### A turning point

For years, people have been telling Gabe Rodriguez that he's too fat, that his weight could make him sick or even lead to death.

The Phoenix eighth-grader tuned them in and out, taking diet supplements one summer, working out at a gym the next, but always returning to his unhealthful lifestyle of overeating and inactivity.

Then something happened last summer that changed Gabe's perspective. In June, his cousin Alice Mejia died of obesity-related illnesses. She was 47.

"You have to see it," the 14-year-old said. "I saw her two days before she died. They told me she was like me when she was younger. Seeing what happens is what really gets you."

At a routine physical in January, Gabe weighed 300 pounds. Doctors expressed surprise that he has no health problems other than high blood pressure, for which he is on medication. Gabe was put on a "very, very strict" diet and told to walk two miles a day.

The teen said he was tired of overeating anyway, because it made his stomach hurt.

"I guess a year of doing it so much made me not want to do it anymore," he said.

But his mom, Liz Pennell, thinks Gabe's emotional reliance on food started when he was 5, about the time she and Gabe's dad, David Rodriguez, split up.

Rodriguez is now back in Gabe's life. His father sent Gabe a birthday card in October, and the pair recently got together for the first time in nine years.

Father and son have similar tastes in music, and they both like to barbecue and chew on ice.

"He's big like I am, too," Gabe said. "Why I feel comfortable over there (his dad's house) is because everyone's big. There's nobody smaller. I can't look at someone and feel, 'Wow, I wish I was them.' "

His activity level has picked up since last year, too. He stays after school twice a week to help run games for a group of kids who play cards. He's teaching himself to play guitar and likes to walk the six blocks from home to Metrocenter on weekends with his friends or hike through a nearby park with Pennell. He'd like a gym membership so he can help his little brother, a first-grader who already weighs more than 100 pounds, work out.

But his diet still needs work: He sometimes skips breakfast and usually doesn't eat lunch at Royal Palm Middle School, because he doesn't like the food. Pennell said her son is trying to eat more fruits and vegetables but is not strictly following his diet.

"I have a lot of faith in him, but I know what it's like to like food for comfort," she said, her eyes welling up with tears. "It's just really hard."

## **Staying disciplined**

**A photograph propped on a hutch near the refrigerator in Daniel Burger's Mesa home is a reminder of how far he has come.**

**The image, taken 18 months ago when the teenager weighed 340 pounds, shows a fat face and huge body. What you see most is the sadness in his eyes.**

**"I remember how miserable I was," Daniel said. "I was just basically ornery. Someone would talk to me, and I'd blow them off."**

**Daniel had so little self-esteem that he routinely skipped classes at Westwood High and nearly flunked out. In desperation, his dad, Gene, enrolled him in the Academy of the Sierras, a boarding school in California for obese kids.**

**In September 2004, Daniel began a boot camp-like program addressing nutrition, exercise and the psychology of overeating. When he came home in July, he'd lost 150 pounds.**

**"In the beginning, I started to slip back into some of the old negative habits, and it took me awhile to notice it because I kept telling myself, 'I'm just taking a little break.' Then it was, 'Whoa, I can't do this. I can't go back to the way I was.' "**

**His motivation was partly about money - an uncle paid the \$55,000 school tuition, and Daniel wasn't about to let him down. But it also had to do with the changes inside himself.**

**"It seems like wherever I go, I'm a more approachable person," said Daniel, who works full time and plans to graduate in May, then go to college. "I'm more confident."**

**The 18-year-old also has a girlfriend, Amanda Walker, a Michigan teenager he met at the academy. They spend hours on the phone, and he sent her a pink teddy bear for Valentine's Day.**

**Daniel thinks about her a lot, while rollerblading or biking or lifting heavy boxes at the Wal-Mart warehouse where he works.**

**At the store, he picks out 100-calorie snack packs and, occasionally, fat-free ice cream, and when he has to eat fast food, he chooses a chicken sandwich, not burgers.**

**Daniel scoffs at the notion that losing weight is more about improving your physical and emotional health, and less about appearance.**

**"It's huge," he says, of looks. "What you see determines what you think of yourself."**

**In December, Daniel had plastic surgery to remove 16 pounds of loose skin from his torso. He still hasn't gotten used to the slim face staring back in the mirror.**

**"I expect to wake up and it was just a dream," he said. "But I look, and it's like, 'Hey, it's me.' "**

## **Surgical success**

Jessica Thompson wakes up with the roosters on school days, leaving at 7 a.m. for the 50-minute drive from her home in Williamsburg, Ohio, to Cincinnati. There, she attends a vocational school, Scarlet Oaks, to train for a job in hotel operations.

The 18-year-old is back home by 4 p.m., which, as the days lengthen, gives her time to shoot hoops in the driveway or take a walk with her boyfriend.

Her routine is a dramatic contrast to two years ago, when Jessica refused to leave her house due to the pitying, disgusted stares of strangers. She weighed 376 pounds, and the severe sleep apnea and asthma, brought on by her obesity, was killing her.

Jessica had gastric-bypass surgery in February 2004 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. The five-hour, \$30,000 procedure reduced her stomach to the size of an egg and restricted food intake. In addition to eating less, she had to learn to eat healthfully, forsaking the double Whoppers and fries for broiled chicken and fresh fruit.

Jessica has lost the equivalent of another person, about 160 pounds. She weighs 218, has a sunny outlook and is looking forward to graduation June 1.

"If I had to do it again, I would," the teen said. "It helped me out with my energy, plus I used to have asthma, and I don't have it anymore."

June Thompson said her daughter has done a good job of following doctor's orders, though avoiding sweets was hard at Christmastime. Jessica saved a pair of her old Size 34-plus pants as a point of pride, and maybe a little fear, too.

"She's always going places, and very seldom is she ever in the house," Thompson said. "This has been good for her health, good for her motivation and self-esteem. She didn't have that before. We have no regrets at all."

## **Family effort**

Luge caught the eye of Zachary Elwell during this year's Winter Olympics, and, with a little imagination, a makeshift track was born on a slightly hilly street near his Phoenix home.

Skateboard? Check. Helmet? Check. Guts? Most definitely.

Despite the lack of ice, the 11-year-old, his brother, Nicholas, 9, and some neighbor kids gleefully rolled down the hill, feet first, backs balanced on skateboards, over and over again.

Such inventive physical activity is common for the Elwell brothers, who also give wagon rides, ride bikes and jog in the streets around their home. It has helped Zachary, who had a weight problem two years ago, stay in shape.

At 9, he weighed 109 pounds and could never beat the throw to first base during his baseball games. His dad, Steve, began jogging with him, and his mom, Terry, shopped for and fixed more healthful foods.

"We are breaking it down into small portions, like sweet foods - not a lot, though, and not all at once," said the fifth-grader at the Center for Educational Excellence in Tempe.

That Zachary, who weighs 106 now, has supportive parents is important. When the Elwells noticed a drop in the boys' activity levels in December, they gave them iPods for Christmas as a motivator. Terry Elwell is experimenting with new recipes to find vegetables Zachary will eat.

"You've got to be consistent," she said. "Steve is the fitness leader in the family, and that's so critical to our success. He's constantly teaching us how to take the next step, and it would be so different if we didn't have someone whose passion is exercise and wellness."

But she also credits Zachary, who had so much fun pretending to be an Olympian that watching it on TV was too boring.

"On his own, he's clearly in tune to the cause and effect of what he eats and how he exercises and how it improves his body," she said.

**Reach the reporter at [janie .magruder@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:janie_magruder@arizonarepublic.com) or (602) 444-8998.**