

## **Woman's weight loss inspires her to help others**

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**GALLUP** – Jennifer Verdugo-Black has something to smile about.

Eight months ago, she was at her highest weight of 382 pounds, and wearing a size 38W in pants. Today, she weighs in at 245 pounds, and is still losing weight.

And though she may be smiling today, things weren't always looking up for the 35-year old Gallup resident.

Verdugo-Black hit a threshold two years ago, when she began experiencing major health problems as a result of her obesity, including the risks associated with being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, having high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. Her obesity was categorized as being morbid, and she was required to sleep with an oxygen tank.

"I was thinking, I don't want to die," she said.

Facing drastic circumstances, she knew that she needed to do something drastic to address her situation. After years of attempting to lose weight through diet and exercise, she began contemplating gastric bypass surgery.

Last May, she underwent the procedure, making her stomach the size of an egg. But it wasn't a decision she made on a whim.

Unlike some people who may have been slender during their youth, or before they have children, Verdugo-Black said she has been heavy her whole life. By the fifth grade, she could fit in her mother's clothes.

"I knew I was bigger than the other kids," said Verdugo-Black, recalling her days as a child growing up in Snowflake, Ariz.

### **Genetic?**

Looking back, Verdugo-Black said she believed at one time that her weight gain was genetic. But after years of self-reflection, attributes her weight gain primarily to unhealthy eating practices.

"I ate what I wanted when I wanted, and when I couldn't get it, I would sneak it," she recalled frankly.

In grade school, her mother enrolled her in an out-of-state weight loss program similar to Weight Watchers, but the program only helped her to shed a few pounds, which she would almost immediately gain back. When she entered high school, she attempted a long list of popular diets and exercised frequently, but the weight stayed on.

The most depressing thing was clothes," said Verdugo-Black, who happily proclaims herself as a lifelong "shopaholic." "Everyone was wearing Junior clothes (in high school) and I was wearing plus-sizes."

### **Stress eating**

Verdugo-Black said while she didn't experience being depressed or suffering a low self-esteem from her weight gain at any point in her life, she remembers that she would deal with stressful situations with eating.

Her struggle with weight loss continued after high school, despite her efforts to reach a healthy weight through frequent diet and exercise.

When her weight literally reached a deadly level, she researched surgery, went to educational seminars about the surgery, and began talking to people who had undergone the surgery, including two of her high school friends.

“I had seen it on TV, people who had surgery, but it was different talking to people who had gone through it,” she said.

And because her obesity was termed morbid by her doctors, her insurance company covered 100% of the costs. But the insurance company didn’t dish out the money to cover the costs. Her insurance, Blue Cross-Blue Shield, required her to follow a 6-month plan to conclude that her weight loss could not be fixed by diet and exercise alone. Verdugo-Black abided, and it was determined by the company that the surgery could be fully covered. Cost estimates for the procedure range in the ballpark of over \$20,000.

## **Preparation**

After over a year of preparation, and consultation with professionals, Verdugo-Black said she was prepared for the two and a half hour procedure.

“I wasn’t nervous. I wasn’t scared,” said Verdugo-Black, recalling the time before she underwent the surgery.

Two weeks later, she shed 20 pounds, and in four months was off of diabetic medication and the oxygen tank.

“I have a lot of energy now,” she said. “People don’t recognize me!”

Today, she must follow a diet, where she eats one-half a cup of food six times a day, and must take daily prescribed vitamins and supplements. Just one-half of an enchilada is more than enough for her.

“It’ll hurt if you eat more,” she said. “I can eat any food I want. I just have to have small portions.”

But she has grown accustomed to her new eating habits, and is enjoying daily exercise as well.

“When you’re 382 pounds, and you’re exercising, it feels like it’s about ready to kill you,” she said, adding that she now is more motivated to work out.

## **Shopping**

Today, shopping is something that Verdugo-Black loves to do even more.

“I’m going to be ecstatic to be out of the plus sizes,” said a smiling and elated Verdugo-Black, who is expected to get down to 130 pounds.

When looking at her old pictures, Verdugo-Black can’t believe she is looking at her old self. “It’s weird because I never saw myself that big,” she said.

Eventually, she will have to undergo surgery to lose the excess skin from the weight loss, which surgeons told her would be about 30 pounds of skin alone. More than likely, she will have to cover the expenses for the surgery.

Now, Verdugo-Black said she enjoys simple pleasures that she said average people probably take for granted, like sitting in booths, tying her shoes, and walking the mall without getting leg cramps. One thing she’s looking forward to is being able to sit

alongside her 9-year old son on an amusement park ride in Disney World, as well as enjoying being able to do everyday things with her 20-year old step-son and husband.

And though she highly recommends the procedure to anyone who faced the same health risks she did as a result of being overweight, she cautions those considering. “It’s a big decision to make,” said Verdugo-Black. “It’s not a quick fix, it’s a whole life change. You have to make sure you’re in the right mind set.”

The change in Verdugo-Black’s life has also inspired her to go back to school and study nutrition.

“I want to help others who are battling weight issues,” she said.

*The Weight Loss Institute of AZ offers gastric bypass surgery and lap band procedures. It has free seminars every other week at its facility in Tempe. For more information about weight loss surgery options, visit [www.wliaz.com](http://www.wliaz.com) or call 480-829-6100.*