

Cathi M. Lee was too heavy even to stand, but she lost massive weight and now she's not only standing ... she's running!

as told to Stephanie Stephens

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I'll never forget being at a party in 2002, about to be introduced in a line of guests. I outweighed each by two-thirds. Everyone on either side of me was introduced, but I wasn't and had to introduce myself.

I'd been ignored. I was "gone," invisible, even though at 5'3" I weighed 506 pounds. I thought, "Here stands Cathi Lee, a cardboard cutout of a former human being." How could they possibly miss me?

In January 2003, I read an article about gastric bypass surgery and its risks. I knew it was not for me, so I spent a year gathering information on diets, nutrition, workouts and the psychology and sociology of massive weight loss. I devised an eating plan without surgery or pills, doctors or nutritionists or group meetings. I would do it my way, and if I failed, I'd dig myself out one way or the other.

I was physically incapable of exercising the first year, but I did lose 90 pounds. Again, no one noticed. After 16 months, I slowly started walking — often away from others. One morning, some boys drove by, yelling at me, and one threw a glass bottle that smashed on the sidewalk, badly scaring me. I didn't call the police, because I knew they'd laugh at me, but I became terrified to walk.

Then, while visiting my grandmother's grave, I realized that the cemetery was a quiet, safe place, so I asked the manager if I could walk there. I did just that for seven months, until, as winter set in, I timidly began going to the gym early in the morning. I eventually made friends — "The Gilley's Gym 4:30 a.m. Gang" — who inspire me to this day. A few women train with me now. I train myself six days a week, sometimes for 2.5 hours, but I must be careful about overworking. I do the treadmill and incorporate yoga and Pilates moves for flexibility, along with aerobics and dancing with free weights — great for punching up the metabolism and the "burn."

Cathi M. Lee



- Birthdate: October 8, 1958
- Hometown: Waterville, Maine
- Employed at: Colby College
- Diet followed: Her own sensible plan

Words to live by: This is a major lifestyle change — physically, mentally and emotionally. Some people see me as a threat now, and others as an inspiration. I'm not going back to the way I was. I couldn't survive it physically or mentally.

Favorite healthy food: Breyers Light (99% Fat Free) with Probiotics Plus yogurt. "I love this stuff — any flavor! I have an eight-ounce serving every morning with a half-cup of berries, a handful of almonds or walnuts, a cup of shredded wheat cereal and two servings of egg whites for a sort of self-made granola mixture. Fills me right up and gives me lots of energy."

I'll celebrate five years of weight loss at 340 pounds on February 1, 2008. I didn't count calories or deny myself food, but I learned to see food for what it is: sustenance. I swore off cheese and crackers, cookies, cakes, chips, dips, donuts and "trigger foods" that ignited a raging appetite.

My Best Advice

Don't start on a Monday or on New Year's Day. Go slowly. Wean yourself off junk food gradually: Try "dropping" something once a week. Drink tons of water, and, yes, lay off the diet soda. Do eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and limit red meat in favor of fish, chicken or turkey. Stop thinking about junk food as "special" or "cheat" food, because it will just put you into a "drunken sugar stupor" in front of the television.

Start with long walks for great therapy, both physically and mentally. One of my greatest highs was completing a marathon in 2005 after seven hours and 42 minutes straight. It was a little over 26 miles, yet many more miles from when I weighed more than 500 pounds and couldn't stand for longer than 20 seconds. I cried with joy as I walked over the finish line and my family cheered. I thanked my good friend, Stacy Meyer Jochem, who basically conned me into that marathon by signing us up with a nonrefundable fee. She always knew I could do it, even when I didn't.

Other people lose weight, but the secret is keeping it off. I must stay motivated and focused, even as I turn 49 this month — with hot flashes too. I'm in the best condition of my life, though, adding muscle where it belongs. Now I give presentations to women and students, and love answering weight-loss questions.

During this process, I've learned so much. When people say, "Just lose weight and you'll be happy," it's not true. I am much happier, but not for the reasons I would have thought. It's because of the amazing friendships I've made, because I was always a solitary person, wary of people, never trusting so I wouldn't be hurt.

I've come so far from being a gorging who once was so depressed that I ordered a three-tiered vanilla wedding cake from a nearby bakery, had fake names put on it, and then spent the next two days eating it with a gallon of milk. It was so mindless and obscene, as was eating three dozen donuts in one sitting. What was smart was taking charge of my life. I smile now when I think of the cemetery director who said, "Who knows, a little leisure time spent walking here may even postpone permanent residency!" He was so right.