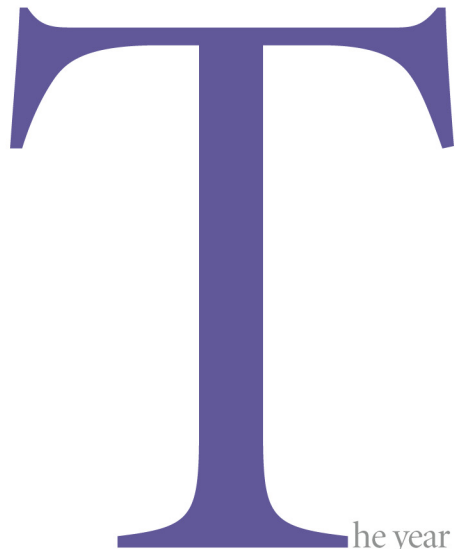




FROM STRUGGLE TO SPOKESPERSON

How one woman's journey impacts thousands of lives...

by Bonnie Budzowski



T

he year was 1998. With back problems aggravated by morbid obesity, Barbara Thompson needed a wheelchair to negotiate the demands of Disney World. Once seated, she caught a glimpse of her daughter Erin's expression. The pre-teen was embarrassed by the wheelchair. She was also clearly ashamed to be embarrassed by the mother she loved. Resolve tightened in the pit of Barbara's stomach. It was time to do something.

Little did Barbara know, at that low moment, that she would become an educator, advocate, and inspiration to thousands who struggle with obesity—and to the medical community that treats them. Barbara didn't know she would gain national acclaim as a speaker and the author of *Weight Loss Surgery; Finding the Thin Person Hiding Inside You*, the first patient-to-patient guide to weight loss surgery. She didn't know that she'd be called upon to co-author *Weight Loss Surgery for Dummies*, and be featured in ABC's "Nightline" and *People Magazine*. Barbara Thompson's personal story parallels that of many weight loss surgery patients—until the part where her own struggle turns into service for others. Since her surgery in 2000, Barbara has been a tireless advocate. Some even call her "the voice of the obese."

While maintaining a 125 pound post-surgery weight loss for eight years, Barbara Thompson is intimately familiar with the struggle, shame, and problems of obesity. She describes herself as a chubby child and an overweight teenager. The true battle began, however, when Barbara quit smoking as an adult. Shortly thereafter, Barbara and her late husband, Lou, adopted a baby daughter, Erin. With motherhood came even more pounds. By the time of the Disney World trip, Barbara's weight had peaked at 270 pounds.

Barbara is not only an inspiration to patients as a very successful bariatric surgery patient eight years after the fact, but also she is quite generous and thoughtful in constantly providing patients with knowledge and helpful tips on how to use their tool effectively.

— Phil Schauer, MD, Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland, OH



At the recommendation of her doctor, Barbara began to investigate weight loss surgery. She quickly discovered that everything written on the topic at that time was from physician to physician. Barbara's research skills were up to the task, however, and she uncovered information about the procedure, the risks involved, and what a patient could expect afterwards.

During the course of her research, Barbara chose Dr. Phil Schauer as her surgeon. Dr. Schauer was located at the University of Pittsburgh, just miles from the Thompson home. Dr. Schauer later became the 2007 president of the American Society of Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery.

In January 2000, Barbara underwent gastric bypass surgery. The procedure went well, with a few minor glitches in recovery. Even so, it was a full eight weeks before friends began to notice the "spring" back in Barbara's step.

Barbara reached her goal weight in only ten months. Like other patients, she suffered at first from nagging nausea, and she had to learn to listen to her body to avoid throwing up. Like other patients, she had to find an exercise routine that worked for her. Through the ups and downs following surgery, Barbara learned that she was not invincible—she would have to carefully watch what she ate.

On a post-surgery day when Barbara sorted through her research files, she found herself thinking, "I either have to throw all this stuff away, or write a book." That was the beginning of *Weight Loss Surgery; Finding the Thin Person Hiding inside You*.

To promote the book, Barbara attended the American Society of Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery convention (then the American Society of Bariatric Surgery) in 2001 and gave copies away to everyone who stopped by her booth. Doctors saw the value and began to order the book, often by the case, for patients considering surgery. Before long, the new author received her first invitation to speak—to a support group in Ohio. She was a nervous wreck!

The interaction with audience members in Ohio ignited something, and before long Barbara was a professional member of the National Speakers Association. Today, to hear Barbara speak is to witness her passion. She regularly speaks to support groups and large crowds, often obtaining corporate sponsorship to cover her own fee. In speeches, Barbara mixes cutting edge information about obesity, and weight loss surgery with the inspiration people need to move forward. "I couldn't do all that I do without corporate sponsorship. I am incredibly grateful to them!" says Barbara.

Through her own story and stories of audience members, Barbara shows obese people they are not alone. Awarding ribbons to individuals who have lost 100 pounds or more, she celebrates achievements and demonstrates the battle CAN be won. And Barbara constantly reminds post-surgery patients to take full advantage of their second chance at life.

During one winter talk, Barbara noticed a woman weeping when she spoke about recommitting to dreams. Later, Barbara

Her knowledge of weight loss surgery is formidable, but it is her eloquence and personal experience that allows her to speak from the heart; she is one of the invited speakers to our support group whose presence inspires not only the patients but the surgeons.

— *Alfons Pomp, MD, Cornell Weight Loss Surgery Program, New York, NY*

managed to speak with the woman. “What is your dream?” Barbara asked. The woman answered, “I haven’t been able to garden or work in the earth for years. Now that I’ve lost weight, I’m waiting for warm weather so I can realize my dream.”

Barbara, who seems cool and collected in an interview, as well as on stage, smiles as she reflects on her journey. “If someone had told me I’d be doing what I am today, I would have laughed out loud,” she admits.

Since 2002, Barbara has published an electronic newsletter. Like her speeches, the newsletters mix cutting edge information with inspiring stories. For example, a recent newsletter reported findings from a study at Purdue University, demonstrating how food with sugar substitutes, like diet soda, actually increase weight gain. Foods that dieters have long considered “free” foods are contributing to obesity.

The interchange between Barbara’s newsletter and her audiences creates a powerful dynamic. At speaking engagements, Barbara invites participants to subscribe to her free newsletter. These subscribers, in turn, pass the invitation on to other weight loss surgery patients. When Barbara speaks to a group of patients, she is speaking to a group of her best friends—no matter how large the group. That’s because her newsletter has over 10,000 subscribers. (You can subscribe to the newsletter at www.wlscenter.com)

Subscribers e-mail Barbara their questions, and she responds, personally, in newsletter form, and in speeches. For example, in 2005 Barbara began to get e-mails asking if she knew of weight loss patients who struggled with alcohol. At first the answer was “no,” but soon she noticed a trend. With some research, Barbara discovered that some weight loss surgery patients have a tendency to transfer food addictions to alcohol, gambling, shopping and sex addictions. Now Barbara sounds this important alert for her fellow patients.

Barbara serves as an expert resource for media, including *The Wall Street Journal* and CNN. She is particularly proud of her role as a Board member of the Obesity Action Coalition. Through this organization she is able to help impact the advocacy and educational role that this organization that sponsors the Walk from Obesity serves.

Ever evolving, Barbara’s journey now includes invitations to provide obesity sensitivity training at hospitals. During her presentations, hospital workers experience the world from an obese patient’s perspective. They imagine how a patient feels

when hospital equipment isn’t strong enough to support that patient’s weight. They glimpse the shame accompanying obesity—shame that makes even mundane medical procedures humiliating. After all, procedures focus on the one thing an obese person wants to hide—the body! Barbara says the only pre-surgery part of her body she liked was her hair. “I always liked big hair,” she quips.

Finally, in response to requests, Barbara developed a Back on Track Program, delivered electronically each month to those struggling with weight regain after surgery. This program, available as a 6-month or 12-month membership, also benefits those who never reached their goal weight after surgery. It provides information, encouragement, and an online community of support.

If Barbara Thompson had to identify the one thing that is most precious to her as “the voice of the obese,” she would choose the speaking and the people she meets as she travels. Barbara has spoken before more than 100 groups in cities big and small. Her most satisfying moments have come in places she might never have visited, like Lincoln, Nebraska; or Nampa, Idaho; Salem, Oregon; or Park Rapids, Minnesota.

“Nothing is more gratifying than getting to meet people who share my history as I share theirs,” says Barbara. “Through electronic communication, these are my best friends before I even open my mouth. When I offer my audience members encouragement, I am encouraged. When I share knowledge that improves their lives, my own life is enriched. Sometimes I can barely believe the privilege I have as a speaker.”

Barbara Thompson has come a long way since she saw embarrassment in her daughter’s face in the Magic Kingdom. Re-counting all she has received from weight loss surgery, Barbara swells with gratitude. Then she quickly moves to her continuing mission and passion—making sure her personal journey improves the lives of countless others who share her ongoing journey—including yours. ■



President of *inCredible Messages*, **Bonnie Budzowski** works with people who want to master the keys to drive their points home so they can increase sales, gain commitment from others, and boost their careers. She is a speaker, trainer, and executive coach, as well as author of *Secrets to Get Busy People to Respond to Your Messages* and *Clickety Clack: 86 Ways to Keep Your Speech on Track*. Contact Bonnie at www.inCredibleMessages.com or 412.361.1490.