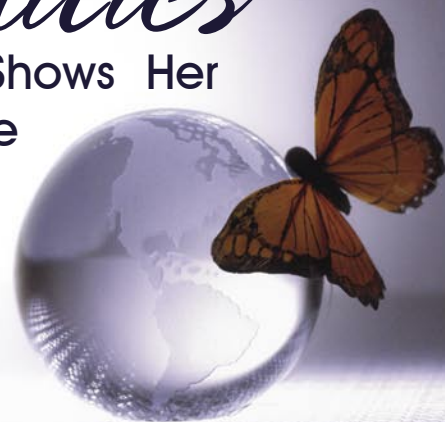


A World of Possibilities

Hedy Weinstein Shows Her Sisters a Lighter Life



by Niloo E Sarabi

Barbara Alpert, author of the book *No Friend Like a Sister*, begins her description of a sister this way: “She is your mirror, shining back at you with a world of possibilities.” Indeed, for Hedy Weinstein, the quote proved to be quite true, because she became for her two sisters the shining mirror, displaying the dazzling hope of a life free of excess weight. Hedy’s story is an inspiring glimpse at how family members can help each other toward a healthier and more promising future.

Coping with her excess weight had always been a struggle for Hedy Weinstein. She began gaining weight quickly and as early as the fourth grade. She weighed around 150 pounds then and was so embarrassed and humiliated by her size that she would often dissolve into tears. “My mother used to tell me that she filled my bottle with chocolate milk, and because my father was a baker, we were always surrounded by sweet food like cakes, rolls and pastries,” Hedy said. Her parents often insisted that their daughters should eat whether they were sick or healthy, but they were not nearly so adamant about the girls participating in sports and outdoor activities. Outdoor games and events were not a vital aspect of her family’s activities, and because of her bashful personality, Hedy usually preferred to stay home and read instead of participating in outdoor activities. “My only means of exercise was to ride my bike occasionally,” she said.

By the time she entered her teenage years, Hedy’s father had developed kidney disease and required regular dialysis treatments. Her sisters, Carolyn and Ellen, had already moved out of the family home, so it fell to Hedy to care for her aging parents. “I tried to do the responsible thing and to help my parents as much as I could, and that is where a lot of my unhealthy eating habits started,” she explained. At the age of 14, Hedy weighed 160 pounds and wore women’s size 16 clothes. “My weight problem had become serious so I decided to create another crash diet, and I only ate cheese sandwiches for lunch for six months,” she said. Following her inventive diet, Hedy was able to lose most of her excess weight. And she maintained a normal weight throughout high school.

Soon after graduating from college, Hedy married her husband, Scott. Four years into their marriage, Hedy began taking fertility drugs in an at-

tempt to become pregnant. She quickly started to gain weight, and by the time she became pregnant with their first daughter, Ilana, she had gained over 100 pounds. Hedy and Scott both enjoyed eating, so Hedy was not embarrassed about indulging herself with her favorite foods when Scott was around. “It was as if we were partners in crime,” she said. “We would treat ourselves to a feast and then we felt bad about it and tried to diet.” Hedy’s doctor advised her not to keep a strict diet during her pregnancy. Instead, he recommended reasonable eating. But Hedy, forgetting to be reasonable in her choices, took this advice as permission to eat freely and abundantly. She ate when she was happy and ate still more when she was stressed or unhappy.

About three years after giving birth to Ilana, Hedy became pregnant with her second daughter, Jillian. Three years later, Hedy was expecting again with her son, Danny. She weighed about 180 pounds at the time. “I pretty much stayed heavy during all those years, and it got to a point that I didn’t care about my weight anymore,” she recalled. Once Danny was born, things started to change. Hedy decided not to work for a while so she could take care of him at home. Her newfound free time inspired her to hire a personal trainer and to



Hedy after losing 190 pounds

“I kept on eating because I wanted so desperately to feel good about myself and my life, but it actually worsened the way I felt about everything”

begin a regular exercise regimen. Not only did she have a great deal of fun with her exercise program, but she was also able to lose over 30 pounds.

However, this carefree time in her life was over, when, after a few years, she returned to her demanding work as a case manager in a hospital emergency room. Shortly afterward, Hedy’s mother and her mother-in-law both succumbed to terminal illnesses and passed away within a few months of each other. The intensity of her work and the loss of her loved ones caused her to sink into depression, and she began to eat as a way of escaping her melancholy. “I kept on eating because I wanted so desperately to feel good about myself and my life, but it actually worsened the way I felt about everything,” she explained.

In early 2001, because of numerous marital difficulties, Hedy and Scott decided to separate. “That was the most heartrending and stressful time of my life. I gained about 70 pounds within a few months,” Hedy said. “But I didn’t stop there and kept on eating until my surgery date.” By the time she moved out of the home she and Scott had shared, Hedy’s weight had increased to 345 pounds, and she had begun to struggle with other health problems. “I was out of breath all the time, my legs were extremely swollen, and I could not bend at all,” she explained. She had to rush to the emergency room several times because of recurring chest pains. It had become evident to her that if she didn’t take some measures to fight her obesity, she would become very sick and die.

Hedy did not discover the full extent of her health difficulties until some time later. “I didn’t know that I had sleep apnea until later on. My children would get scared because I made horrible choking noises in my sleep,” she explained. She also found out that she had developed mitral valve regurgitation—one of the many side effects of using Phen-fen. “I had always believed

that I could lose the extra weight by dieting or medication," she said, "but I finally realized that I could not and that if I could have done it alone, I would have done it by then." So, she decided to undergo weight loss surgery and began searching for a surgeon. She had met Dr. Carlos Carrasquilla at the hospital where she worked, and was always impressed by his cheerful and friendly attitude. After meeting with him, Hedy was even more impressed by his optimism about her chances of success and his expertise. "He was one of the few surgeons who performed the gastric bypass procedure laparoscopically, and after meeting him I felt much more confident about my decision," she said.

The insurance company approved her surgery immediately, but it took Hedy another year and much additional research to confirm her decision to have surgery. On March 19, 2002, Dr. Carrasquilla performed her laparoscopic Roux-en-Y gastric bypass. The surgery went well, but Hedy's initial recovery presented new challenges. She developed an ileus, or intestinal blockage, and her intestines shut down for a period of five days. During that time her only source of nutrition was intravenous fluids. Additionally, she experienced abdominal pain and vomiting following her surgery due to an ulcer at the opening of her stomach.

Hedy lost 70 pounds during the first two months following her surgery. She was overjoyed about her constant progress and often reflected on how her life was improving as her body went through its transformation. The surgery had eliminated many of the obstacles she had faced before. It had also brought a great deal of hope and optimism into her children's lives. She often thought about how immobile and tired she had been just one year before while participating in her daughter's field day at school. "I overheard one of my daughter's classmates say that I was so big I could become the spokesperson for Jenny Craig," Hedy recounted. "That was the first time I realized my weight was deeply affecting my children." Although she knew that her children loved her regardless of her size, she felt responsible for the social and emotional challenges they faced because of her weight.

After witnessing Hedy's impressive transformation, her sister Carolyn decided to have the surgery. At the age of 61, Carolyn weighed about 400 pounds and struggled with numerous health problems—to the point that she could hardly get out of bed. Then, a few months after Hedy's operation, in July 2002, Carolyn underwent open gastric bypass surgery. "She went to a different doctor and was unable to have the procedure laparoscopically," Hedy ex-



Hedy and her sisters

plained. "She had to stay at the hospital for an entire month, and had almost every complication in the book." Carolyn's prospects seemed much better after she was released from the hospital. She kept losing weight steadily and felt better every day. Shortly after Carolyn's operation, Hedy's other sister, Ellen, also underwent surgery. Her laparoscopic gastric bypass procedure was quite successful, and she was able to lose over 80 pounds within four months. "My sisters both look incredible and feel great. We call ourselves the gastro sisters, and we usually end up splitting and sharing our food together when we go out together," Hedy said with a smile.

Today, Hedy and her children enjoy participating in a number of outdoor activities and sports. She feels grateful for the operation that liberated her body and spirit, allowing her to be a more active mother and an energetic employee. "I had always wanted to roller-blade and play tennis, and now I am certain that I can," she said. A few months after her surgery, Hedy began attending college, and she anticipates receiving her bachelor's degree in nursing soon. By practicing healthy nutrition in and out of her home, she endeavors to set a good example for her children. "My focus is not so much on how much I can eat, but what I eat. I try to eat a little every few hours, and if I feel full, I don't take another bite," she says.

Thinking back on all that she and her sisters had been through, Hedy realized that whatever the cause, their collective weight problem was far from being a choice. But ultimately, their close relationship gave them the courage and inspiration to make the weight loss journey. Hedy set out on that road first. When Carolyn and Ellen looked at Hedy's new body and new life, as in a mirror, they saw themselves transformed. After all, that is what sisters are for. ♥