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 FAMILY IMAGES BY Lisa Hensley

Breaking the mould

THE BIRTH OF A BADASS

HOW THE WORLD OF HEALTH AND FITNESS HELPED TIFFANY LEE GASTON OVERCOME HER INNER TURMOIL

Built on the frame of a gymnast, even from a very young age my physique often drew attention. It wasn't long before that attention made me very uncomfortable and unsure of myself. I began to wish my body conformed to the socially accepted norm so that I could blend in, and this burning desire would lead me to a very unhealthy place during my early teens.

As time went on I learned the hard way that you can't have everything you want in life. In terms of body types, my teenage desire to be like the supermodels of the '90s became one that would negatively affect my health.

THE PRESSURE OF CONFORMITY

My determination to strip away the muscle naturally formed over the many years I participated in sports became a compulsion I couldn't control. I starved my healthy 105lbs (48kg) frame (I was 12 years old at the time) down to a frail 85lbs (39kg).

The control I exerted over my daily food intake was all-consuming and made me feel very powerful. I obsessed over the number on the scale and could see little else. If that number was lower than the day before then I felt like I was winning this distorted game I was playing.

Soon my sickly body could no longer be hidden beneath the baggy clothes I donned for nearly six months. My family took notice of my appearance and change in behaviour and took action. Threatening to hospitalise me, we came to a compromise. I reluctantly agreed to seek counselling which helped me understand the root of my compulsive behaviour. It wasn't until I uncovered the reasons why I lacked self-love that I could do anything to change my circumstances.

In time I gained a positive perspective on the way my genetics dictate the shape I am meant to be. I discovered a new love for my strong, athletic body and treated it as such. I shifted my focus away from the unobtainable body types among the pages of fashion magazines and directed my attention toward the healthy bodies I saw in fitness publications. This new outlet was the beginning of better health and ultimately my love for weight training once I hit high school.

THE NEXT CHALLENGE

While this new outlook helped to take me to a better place for a time, years later I would find myself with a man who was just as unhealthy for me as the self-inflicted eating disorder I once suffered.

My obsession had once been the number on the scale but that had now morphed into a fight to hide and defend the behaviour of a man who routinely verbally and physically abused me. As time went on, my self-worth was so heavily predicated on a man who broke me down daily in the hopes of keeping me tight beside him.

He broke my spirit in ways I never knew was possible due to

his own insecurities. At the time I didn't see how his abusive behaviour was a direct reflection of his own inner turmoil, low self-esteem and alcoholism. Of course, I had heard about men who treated women as possessions but now I was with one of them and couldn't make the association from my

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position within this abusive relationship. I now know that I was nothing more than a trophy to him. I stayed far too long in a relationship that could've ended my life because I believed this was real love. However, the

evening he held a loaded gun to my head was the last time I'd ever see him.

Discovering what I wanted in life wasn't an easy feat, particularly early on, but it remained my greatest challenge in finding inner peace and contentment. My continued search led to my second real relationship in life, which would prove to be a case in point. Having met a much older man I began relying on him to determine my worth, which would soon become my grandest mistake of all. Sadly, I didn't value myself enough to leave until it was nearly too late. However, I've now chosen to view this part of my life as a lesson and not a mistake. Had I never been with someone like him, I could never appreciate the light that was about to shine upon me.

Tiffany aims to inspire others to achieve their health and fitness goals.

