

One woman's courage to be a big loser



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Sandra MacDonald is a big loser, the kind that makes me honoured to know her. She lost 155 pounds in one year, and is still losing.

For the past 12 months, I've worked out regularly with Sandra, and watched her literally disappear, from a maximum of 387 pounds in December 2010, to 232 pounds. A year ago today, she met our trainer, Damir Mulalic, and joined his Empowerment Personal Training boot camp.

In total, she works out five hours a week with Mulalic, who specializes in helping obese people get healthy. Finding the right fitness club, one that actually welcomes fat people, was a major challenge for the 34-year-old Calgarian, who works in the helping profession herself, with disabled people.

Contrary to common sense, and despite the rhetoric about the societal problem of obesity, too many gyms still create an environment where only a certain body type feels part of the so-called elite club. Intentionally or not, they are driving away the very people who need their services most.

Mulalic attributes Sandra's success to what she did outside the gym, and to her commitment. Sandra, who has struggled with her weight her whole life,



Finding the right fitness club was a challenge for Sandra MacDonald.

relearned how to eat. She educated herself about nutrition and began looking at food as a way to fuel her body, rather than to make her happy by filling up the insatiable void inside.

The turning point came when even sitting on the couch made her uncomfortable. "It would hurt me to sit in a position, so I would roll over to my other side," Sandra recalled this week, while sharing her story with me. "I was so lazy, I didn't even want to get up to get food, or to get the remote. I would reach it with my foot."

Depressed, isolated and secluded, she was "at a loss," but knew she had to do something. She couldn't even go on holidays without a cane, and would "snap at everything because I hurt, and when you hurt, you have no patience."

Stomach bypass surgery was an option, but one Sandra felt would fail to give her the healthier life she craved.

A fan of the reality TV show, *The Biggest Loser*, about obese people competing to lose the most



Photos courtesy, Sandra MacDonald

MacDonald has lost 155 pounds and dropped from a size 28 to a size 12.

weight, Sandra decided it was time to become a Big Loser herself. She and her partner went to Arizona for Christmas and New Year's last year, and bought the official Biggest Loser bodybugg bracelet, which tracks calories consumed and burned. During that trip, Sandra, who could no longer find clothes in Canada that fit, bought outfits for work in the biggest size she could find, 28. "That was the last size clothes they had in the States. I barely fit in these clothes. I thought, if I get any bigger, what am I going to do?"

What she did was change her life. First, she made herself accountable, by putting her fitness and weight goals on Facebook for the world, and her friends, to witness. She eats three meals a day,

and two snacks, of satisfying, nutrient-rich foods, rather than empty calories that leave her wanting. She's creative about her chicken and fish, and organized, buying groceries every Sunday and putting a week's worth of snacks and small meals into Ziplocs, as they are portioned.

Sandra also learned her triggers, such as staff meetings and the ever-present temptation of doughnuts. So, now she brings her own snacks, which do include the occasional sugary treat — just the healthier version she bakes at home. Processed foods are out, and her rule on packaged foods is a maximum of five ingredients, plus spices.

Still, the journey to a healthier life was no walk in the park, despite all of the walking and running it involved. As the pounds came off, they revealed issues that had to be dealt with for Sandra to understand the root causes of her obesity. "I still have the fat-girl self-esteem, occasionally," says the woman who now wears size 12 in lululemon workout clothes. "But I'm definitely a happier person. I don't feel like I'm putting on a happy face anymore to go out in public."

From across the gym floor, Sandra always struck me as the one in the class who motivates others and makes us laugh. Everyone loves Sandra, even though there's less of her to love these days, after losing 40 per cent of her initial body weight. Congratulations, Sandra, you big loser.

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