

Have you ever had the thought “this can’t be my life” or perhaps “this can’t be my body”. If you have, you’re not alone.

As an overweight kid E.A. had these thoughts time and time again and these thoughts would follow him for many years to come. E.A. wasn’t always overweight, he was an average sized child until he was 6 or 7 at which point he fell extremely ill and was hospitalized and stayed in the PICU and was treated with heavy rounds of steroids and antibiotics. Upon release from the hospital, E.A.’s appearance changed from an average weight child to a child who appeared very swollen (side effects of steroids) and now unable to do the things he once enjoyed. He had to slow down quite a bit until his health was fully restored but by this time an eating habit would develop. Little did E.A. or his mom know, this would change his life and catapult him into a depression, have low self-esteem and eating to pacify his feelings and thoughts would begin. The years went on and E.A.’s weight sky rocketed from the low 100’s at a very young age to a whopping 388 lbs by the time he was 16 years old. E.A. felt lost, he said “he felt like he was going to have to live with the weight the rest of his life” and felt “helpless and hopeless”. We agonized with him through every facet of his journey and suffering and it hurts so deep to watch a loved one in so much emotional and sometimes physical pain.

His depression was at an all time high, self-esteem plummeted to nonexistent and at 16 his health is in jeopardy. E.A. had high blood pressure, was pre-diabetic, had sore joints and was winded by walking short distances and even his skin began to darken in certain areas of his body. His body was sending him messages that he did not quite understand or frankly, care to understand. The days, months and years of being overweight lay heavily on E.A.’s health as well as his mental state and it affected every aspect of his life and was all consuming. “How do I stop”, “How do I change” and “I can’t do this anymore” were a regular part of self-talk and thinking. He wanted to be happy, wanted to have friends and began liking girls but the feeling was not reciprocated which only fueled his depression. His family worried more about him as he started to become more of a recluse and the family began to see less and less of him and he fell behind in school and his life choices echoed his inner feelings.

Eventually the time would come when E.A. would make a life altering change - July 2015 to be exact. E.A. was presented with a very real scare with his health and he began taking life and diet serious. E.A. made up his mind and overnight changed his thinking and reached out for help from his mom. Hi mom prepped his meals and got rid of any sign of junkfood in the house. E.A. made the conscious decision to stop closet eating and began to work out daily. It was difficult but E.A. literally worked through the pain, blood, sweat and tears until he finally worked his way to a slow jog. Eventually he was able to run then run daily and even play basketball multiple times a day in 100 degree heat! No more excuses! Month 1 resulted of this change resulted in a 20lb weight loss and within 5 months, 50lbs! E.A. loved the results and the way he felt and quite enjoyed the support he was getting from his friends and family. Alas, the day came when he began to feel like he has never felt before; he felt great! E.A. was very regimented and dedicated in his routine, eating, prepping and working out and even began to inspire other people. People were taking note in this new found glow and happiness as he came out of his shell and became more social, positive and hopeful. The results of these changes began to show in school where he was once ranked one of the lowest kids to one of the top and the most improved. E.A. changed from being one of the largest kids on campus to the memorable kid who lost half of his body weight.

One whole year has passed and E.A. lost over 170 pounds, dropped 10 pant sizes (XXXXL) to a regular M/L shirt! While E.A. had maintained his diet, workout routine and weight but one thing remained, remnants of his former obese self. E.A. still had to deal with the ever nagging and uncomfortable lose sagging skin of something that once

was. A harping, nagging and very real reminder of his former self and bad choices was a constant reminder staring at him in the mirror. He and his mom visited a couple of doctors who agreed the sagging skin should be removed but at a hefty price (\$12,000). A mother of five on a disabled veteran's income was surely not going to be able to come up with \$12,000. They tried insurance and were denied multiple times and were left feeling hopeless. E.A. would continue to hide behind compression garments or tight shirts under his regular shirts. Choosing clothes to hide his sagging stomach and chest was a well thought out process and took more time than it should.

Enough is enough! We gave up on the insurance after months of back and forth with approvals and denials (sometimes within a 24 hour period) and bureaucracy. We had to think of something so we started a GoFundMe campaign to try and raise money needed to get the excess skin removal and gynecomastia surgery done.

The campaign moved along very slowly until one day I received an email from Jenny BlackDeer from CSPSERF. She found our campaign and reached out to us to tell us about their Organization. She explained that CSPSERF (California Society of Plastic Surgeons Educational and Research Foundation) is a non-profit Organization whose mission is to help California children who may benefit from reconstructive plastic surgery but whose family may not be able to afford the procedure otherwise. It seemed too good to be true so I doubted the authenticity of the message. I began looking into the Organization and the legitimacy of it. It all seemed to check out and so I passed the baton to my sister so she could speak with Jenny.

Could CSPSERF be the answer to our fervent prayers to get help with E.A.'s surgery? You know what?! It was!! This Organization has been a blessing to our family and to my nephew on so many levels, just for doing what they do on a daily basis. E.A. would have his gynecomastia performed by the very loving and experienced hands of Dr. Downey and staff who would kindly offer her services and time for free. They cared, they were transparent, they were responsive, helpful and extremely knowledgeable. I do believe there is a special place in heaven for people who love kids and people they way they do.

Three months would go by with continued support until ultimately we would receive a phone call that would change E.A.'s life, a surgery date of 2/8/2017! Someone pinch me! This is really happening and we were over the moon with excitement and gratitude.

Shortly before surgery my sister and nephew would have the opportunity to meet Dr. Downey, to thank her and to get information and details of all the surgery would entail. Meeting Dr. Downey was so surreal, a true "pinch me" moment and only then would our family realize the magnitude of what Dr. Downey, her team, Jenny and CSPSERF were doing for my very deserving nephew. They were an answer to many prayers, prayers that have reached across the globe (The Americas, Japan, Samoa, Netherlands, China etc.) Finally, all the dots were connecting, all the names and voices have beautiful faces to match and it was clear that we were exactly where we should be and this entire scenario was wonderfully crafted and given to us as an answered prayer. Something so beautiful it could only have been touched and given with such grace & mercy that there is no doubt where or whom it is coming from. For all the times I've said "no matter what happens your identity is not in your circumstances nor is your identity found in your wounds but in your healing and faith. Your pain isn't made to stop you but to grow you". In E.A.'s situation, he was hurt, low, dark and hid behind food; however, I would not allow him to settle for these feelings of darkness and self doubt to outshine what possibilities faith, love and determination could bring. We would be the light in his darkness. We'd prayed for Dr. Downey we just didn't know her name or when or how she would come into his life (all of our lives). Finally, the opportunity to be able to thank her for giving my nephew this once in a lifetime opportunity

The much anticipated surgery day has arrived and E.A.'s dream of having the surgery is truly right here and right now, it's happening! I don't think this kid has slept a wink but his smile was ear to ear. We cried happy tears as

they rolled him back to the surgical room; we knew when he woke up he would want to see the immediate difference and would likely care very little about the pain. You know what? That's exactly what happened. He came out of surgery looking down at his chest and ran his hands across the bandages and said "they're gone" and by "they" he meant the remnants of what his body once was, his sagging skin and male breasts. He grinned and said "thank you, thank you"! I'm certain his pain meds may have had something to do with it but he truly was happy and grateful, the kid was on cloud 9. He would doze in and out of resting from the meds and each time he awoke he smiled and gave thumbs up. It was the cutest thing ever!

This once 388 pound kid now 190 pounds laying in a hospital bed recovering but with permanent grin saying "we did it" makes every painstaking talk, prayer, tear, attempts and failures all worth it for this one moment. He did do it. He did it with the help of Dr. Downey, CSPSERF (Jenny specifically for reaching out), prayer warriors and he himself who in an instant changed his life and mentality and began loving himself enough to know that he was worth it all. Food would no longer be his pacifier, it would be nourishment and fuel, he would treat his body with respect, he would learn and share his knowledge with others and he would fight for himself and learn that he is never alone and is truly loved. To be a part of someone's journey and watching them filled with so much joy, is very gratifying and beautiful.

Post surgery: E.A. now 4 months out of surgery and now 18 years young but for the first time EVER walked around with his shirt off in front of his family or anyone for that matter. HE looks and feel better than he has ever felt in his 18 years. He has maintained a weight of 190-195 having lost 198 pounds to date. His confidence is at an all time high; he's ambitious, adventurous and has become more social and continues to maintain his diet and nutrition. He now works a full-time job, works out at the gym and plays basketball and is very helpful at home. He is still very much interested in the joining the military and is buying his first car. He has also started a "fat to fit" Instagram page where he shares his journey in hopes to inspire people just like him. There have already been so many "firsts" since his lifestyle change and surgery.

Because of people with hearts like Jenny, organizations like CSPSERF and wonderful doctors like Dr. Downey and her team, this was all possible and have each left a permanent mark on our hearts and in our lives. Thank you for filling people with hope when they thought there was none and for being beacons of light where there was only darkness.

In gratitude, love, respect and faith,

E.A. & Co.