

Excerpts from Melissa's Journal

The writings below chronicle Melissa Jeannette Garcia's lifelong struggle with her weight, and her experience with gastric bypass surgery at Skyline Medical Center. From her failed attempts at dieting and diet pills to the cancellation of her first surgery... from the undying support of her husband Luis ("Shorty") to the present (at her goal weight and feeling great!), these writings are candid personal descriptions of her experiences.

Childhood

My name is Melissa J. Garcia and I have been severely overweight all of my life. I remember as a child I had to wear adult clothes sizes even though I was only nine years old. My mother would hide food and snacks from me to try to help me to lose weight. But when I would find them, I would consume every bite of whatever I was eating.

My PE teacher in the 4th grade was very hard on me. She could not understand why I would have to sit down before gym class was over. I remember that I was so tired all the time, and that my legs hurt all the time. Not knowing that I was obese, I thought all children had the same pains and eating habits like me.

High School

As I entered into high school, my family wanted me to lose weight so I entered a Weight Watchers program. I went to their meetings and I followed their diet program. ...I lost around 20 pounds at one time. But the minute I slipped, I gained that 20 pounds back, plus eleven pounds more.

At 15, I had my appendix removed... I started taking Dexatrim for about three months. Once again, I lost some weight, but not a whole lot. And once again I gained that weight back and more. I believe in high school, I tried every type of diet pill available at that time. The story was always the same. I would lose a few pounds, but always gained back more.

Young Adulthood

Immediately after the birth of my daughter (at age 17), I started an exercise program to help me get back into at least my former clothing size. But it never happened. I had a C-section and my stomach never did shrink; it just kept growing and growing.

Over the years, I joined another program called NutriSystem and a gym and spa. I worked hard on both diet and exercise for about 4 months. And just like all the prior attempts, I lost about 20 pounds and then gained it all back and more.

Serious Medical Problems Begin

In 1991 I was diagnosed with colon polyps, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Osteoarthritis. It seems that from 1991 on, I lived in constant pain. My knees and ankles, hips and back and neck... well basically my whole body hurt me non-stop. I began to become more fatigued and unable to walk, much less exercise. That year is when the weight really began to pile on.

In 1995, I had surgery for endometriosis. But I was still considered anemic. I decided to try a new-found drug called fastens & pondemen together. My GYN prescribed them for me, and he said they were a guaranteed thing. I lost 35 pounds in five months. But the side effects and the weight gain

after was awful. I was so angry all the time. I was active, but in chronic non-stop pain due to the arthritis. I gained back right at 75 pounds when the medication was no longer prescribed for me.

Then in 1997 I was in an auto accident. ...My back was broken and I was in the hospital for five days, and then bed rest for four more weeks. In that four weeks, I gained fourteen more pounds. That back injury has caused me a lot of limitations. ...more than before. I continue to have severe back and neck pain... and stenosis of the spine and bulging disks.

In 1998 I had emergency gallbladder surgery. The doctor told me that the problem to my gallbladder was caused because of all the diet medication I had taken in my lifetime.

Since that surgery, I've continued with my chronic pain. ...I have high blood pressure and high cholesterol. ...At this time in my life, my weight has control over my life, not me, the person inside of this body.

Fall of 2001

I am a morbidly obese person, morbid meaning sick. I have been seeing doctors on a regular basis for the past seven years or more. The last two years, my health has gone downhill rapidly. I have arthritis in all my joints, especially my back, hips and knees. I have chronic pain all the time due to this illness. I also have high blood pressure and high cholesterol. My doctor has recommended that I go see a nutritionist to see if they can help with losing some weight... or I will end up in a wheelchair before I'm forty due to a rapid deterioration of my knees.

My first appointment with the nutritionist was September 14, 2001. Based on all the information provided by my doctor, I was told that I was a perfect candidate for the gastric bypass surgery. They explained that this was a permanent way of losing the 170 pounds that I need to lose and keep it off. I went to two support groups and found it very helpful to understand more about what having this surgery meant. ... I had another appointment with the nutritionist on November 9. ... There was a cancellation so on October 30, I went to meet the surgeon. We discussed the procedure and the fact that this is truly a life-changing outcome, and that I will need to follow all the diets and do everything that they recommend I do. I will return to see him on November 14, and hopefully we can get a date set for the surgery.

I have looked up a lot of information on the computer and I have stopped all sugar intake and I've increased my steps from 1200 to 3000 or more on a daily basis. This has been hard due to the pain in my knees and back, but I do it and sometimes I even exceed 5,000. I feel great when I exceed my own expectations.

I have already started chewable vitamins and Vitamin C, and I've lowered the dose of Naprosen I've been taking because Dr. said that prior to surgery I would need to discontinue it at least two weeks before surgery. So I'm trying to find other pain relievers that help. I've stocked up on Carnation liquid breakfast (sugar-free), and chicken and beef baby food. I've bought a couple of different protein drinks. I'm checking them out now so I'll know what "works", or should I say, what I'll "like better" after the surgery.

I went on October 22 to talk to the psychologist. My evaluation with her went really good. So I hope that when I return to Dr. ... on the 14th, he tells me that I am ready to go.

My primary care doctor is so excited that hopefully everything will go well, and I will begin to regain my life back after the surgery. I had never realized how limited my life was until I began to notice that I'm different. I cannot go to movies or amusement parks because I do not fit in the seats or on the rides. Even to go to the mall is hard for me because of the pain from the arthritis.

I pray that God does allow me this second chance at life and I will do everything that I can to make the best of the new life I will have. My husband is my "number one" fan. He is trying to adjust to our new no-sugar diets. The no-fat is hardest on him because he loves his Mexican food. The most important thing that we agree on is that I'm having this surgery for me. I want to feel good. Everyday when I wake up, I hurt to get out of bed and then once I'm up, I have to struggle to put one foot in front of the other.

Winter of 2001

It's November now and the cold weather is here and I hate it. This time of year, I have more pain than normal. ... I hope that anyone who has a negative attitude about this surgery will keep it to themselves. I like to be surrounded by positive input and attitudes. So I guess that makes me like every other person in the world! Well, I will write more after my appointment with Dr. ... on the 14th.

My appointment with Dr. ... had a slight snag. I've been anemic for all of my adult life so he said he would wait two months to see a hematologist and get my blood built up before making his final decision. ...

My blood has come up from an 8.2 to an 11.5, so he has agreed to my surgery. I'm so excited so now I just wait for a date! ...Several weeks have passed and no word from Dr. ... so I go to a support group meeting and there I learn that Dr. ... office is no longer accepted my insurance. This truly broke my spirit – the office never bothered to call me or give me any explanation. I was so discouraged I became very depressed and began my usual routine of eating everything in sight. I gained an extra 15 pounds ... and both my ankles are now sprained from the weight.

One of the girls at a support group gave me the number to Dr. Arnulfo Agbunag, so I called his office and right from the minute of talking to his office, they all felt my distress and scheduled my appointment within a week.

Dr. Agbunag was very pleasant. He explained everything to me regarding the surgery again. He also accepted all my studies that had been done with Dr. ... and that was truly a blessing. Thank God I did not have to go through all of that again.

Within a week after my appointment, Jo submitted my papers to the insurance company for approval. Within two weeks I had my approval and a surgery date. I was so excited! ... Jo said that she had been praying for me. It really surprised me at how caring she was. ...She sounded really happy for me. When I go on Monday for my pre-op visit, I will give her a great big hug. She has really gone beyond her duty and I really appreciate it a lot. So I'm very excited, but I'm afraid to get really happy for the fear of another cancellation.

I thank God for this wonderful blessing because I know that because of my prayers and His love, this is truly going to happen for me. I will write more on Monday after my pre-op visit.

Monday, May 13, 2001

My pre-op visit went really well. All my blood work came back well. So Thursday, I'm having my surgery. I called my sister Becky to let her know because she wants to be here for me. I'm very excited and I still can't believe it's really going to happen. My Mom, Becky, and Angel and Santana are all coming down on Wednesday. I really hope my dad has changed his mind and that he will also be here.

Wednesday, May 15, 2001

It's the night before surgery and Becky, Mom, Sissy and Santana all made the trip from Virginia to be here. Shorty and I weren't at home when they got here but we were pulling in and I saw someone in the back of Becky's car, and I just knew it was daddy, but it wasn't. ... He did send me a nice letter wishing me good luck.

May 16-21, 2001

I was admitted at 6 a.m. on May 16. Then I was a little nervous. Shorty (husband Luis) has taken pictures before and after surgery. ...Everything just happened so fast from the time I signed in. I barely got a chance to tell everyone that I loved them before they took me away. The nurse did tell them I would be in surgery for several hours.

I really don't remember much about the first day. I was in ICU. ... The next morning they were taking me again for x-rays ... They let me see Santana in the hallway. Becky and Sissy were going back to Virginia. I remember Santana, but that's it for a while. Shorty told me that Sandra came to see me, but she got sick and had to leave. There were a lot of tubes and pumps and wires and I don't think she was prepared for all of that. ... I was not surprised. I had been to enough support groups and looked up enough information on the internet to be prepared for the unexpected. I do remember one thing. I went to sleep with the IV in my arm and when I woke up, it was in my neck.

The second day, I was told that I needed to try to get up so I did. And, as Dr. Agbunag said, each time I got up it got easier and easier. Shorty would come and bathe me before he went to work. That really made me happy because I really didn't want the nurses to see how big I was. I got my stitches out. I had a little tire-looking thing down my stomach to keep the staples from tearing open. They gave extra support to the stapes.

Thursday, May 22, 2001

I'm one week post-op and already I'm under three hundred pounds. That really is exciting for me to know that just one week ago I weighed 323 pounds. WOW. Dr. Agbunag is very pleased with my progress. I get to go home today.

The Progress Continues

Dr. Agbunag has told me to drink three Carnation Instant Breakfast 8 ounces every day and he stressed the importance of the vitamins and calcium and 48 ounces of water per day. Man, it is almost impossible to drink so much, but I did it for six weeks. I weigh 272 now. I can start pureed food now, but I need to continue the water intake and at least one carnation per day.

Eight weeks. I did it! I weigh 262!

I'm now 16 weeks post-op. I still continue my vitamins. I eat whatever I want. No sodas nor sugar. I weigh 238! Another 15 pounds and I've lost a total of 100 pounds! WOOOOOOOWWWW!

I can't believe how much my life has changed since my surgery. Everything is different. I have begun to realize that I have not lived in the past seven years. I only existed. I remember that I was not able to make the trips from Tennessee to Virginia (where my family lives) because of all my pain. The last movie I went to was in 2000 because I became stuck in the theater chair and Shorty and I waited till everyone in the theater left to pull me out of the chair. Man, I was so embarrassed. When we would go to the mall, whoever was with me would rent me a wheel chair because I hurt too bad and was not able to keep up.

I look back on a lot of things and realize that we truly live in a cruel world. I remember before that everyone would look over me or through me before. Now people look at me and sometimes hold the door for me. I weigh 230 pounds. But my life has changed so much in these four months. I no longer take blood pressure medicine or pain medicine. I no longer need my diabetic medicine. I feel that I have been given a second chance at life. This has not been easy. I continue to learn more and more about me with each passing day.

August 2003

It's been one year and three months since my surgery. I weigh 170 pounds. I still cannot believe the changes in my life. I can honestly say that I have a life. It really saddens me to look back and remember the "me" before. I never knew it then, but I was a very sad and depressed person. My life was so limited. I had not been on vacation with Shorty in six years to Mexico due to being so big and sick all the time. This year we spent a whole month there and I truly enjoyed every minute of it. It was the first time that I had walked the whole border without having to stop every block or just stay at the house and sleep while Shorty and his family did whatever.

I am so grateful to Dr. Agbunag and to Dr. Jenny Meyers, my primary care doctor, who gave me faith in myself that I could do this. I remember when she told me that my weight was killing me and that I needed to do something about it. Man, that was my wake-up call because I never felt that I was obese; I thought I was sick. That probably sounds weird, but it's true. I have been overweight my whole life, so I never looked at the weight as a problem nor reason for my health problems. But after losing the weight I now see that for 36 years I never really lived, but that in fact, I only existed up until May 16, 2002. ... I enjoy each and every day now as if it's the last. Before I could not even walk to the mailbox, now I walk three miles three days a week. I work out three days a week. I get up early and go to bed late, and I feel good. The only medicine I take at this time is multi vitamins and B-12 shots once a month. For me that's a miracle in itself because before I had a complete pharmacy with all the medicines that I had to take.

I used to wear a 30-32 pants and a 3-4X shirt. Now, I'm a size 12-slim pants and a Medium shirt. During all the changes I have experienced in the past year, I'm very thankful to say that there is one thing in my life that has remained the same and is that my husband has always been there. He loved me when I was sick and obese, and I can truly say that he has been there all the way. He cared for me for many years when I was sick, he took care of me in and out of the hospital. I know that he is part of the reason for my success because there are truly times that I wasn't sure if I could do my part. But he showed me that we would get through this together. He has gone on a diet too - low-fat and low-sugars. He has joined the gym with me. He does not bring junk food home, so he has made sacrifices too. So I would like to thank you for your love and support. Luis, you're the greatest and I love you.

