

FULL VERSIONS OF THE YOUNG CALIFORNIANS' NARRATIVES EXCERPTED IN

“DISORDERED EATING/EATING DISORDER: HIDDEN PERILS OF THE NATION'S FIGHT AGAINST FAT”

DIAGNOSED AT 13 – JULIANA'S STORY

The story I am about to tell is my own personal account dealing with my battle against my body size, my food consumption, and most importantly, my weight. Although I do not have a classified eating disorder, such as anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating, I carry around with me a constant obsession with what foods I should be consuming in order not to gain weight. My weight and food intake [invade] my thoughts constantly, and I have waged a war against allowing my body to develop into a woman's body. I have had a hard time accepting the curves and fat associated with growing older; instead, I focus constantly on my willpower and discipline against certain foods and exercising enough. At the age of 13, I began counting calories and walking for hours on the treadmill, not something typical a 13-year-old should be doing. This fight in opposition to my body's weight began at a time when all I should have been worried about was playing, and being naive to society's expectations of a “perfect woman's body.” A combination of medical, family, and societal forces have encouraged my struggle to persist for over seven years...

When I was 13, I became aware that I was overweight because of a visit to the doctor's. Although I wasn't considered obese, I was not as skinny as a girl of 13 years old is expected to be. My pediatrician considered me a problem: it was my fault I reached for seconds, it was my fault I did not know what healthy foods I was supposed to be eating. Someone forgot to remind her that I was only 13. I remember her clearly telling my mother that I needed to eat less and exercise more. I recall her looking at her BMI chart and shaking her head; I knew that I did not fit into the norm for a girl my height. From then on, my weight became a disease; it was a problem that I had to cure and my pediatrician was the ultimate source of power dictating to me that I was problematic...

My family and my background have contributed to my obsession with weight and food as well. My father, a middle-aged, hardworking man, has also struggled with his weight ever since we moved to the US from Guatemala in December of 2000. In Guatemala, where I am from, portions are much smaller than they are here in America. It is customary to eat at home every night for dinner, and it is rare that a family eats out. It is also much more uncommon to eat fast food. However, making the move here changed my and my family's customs drastically. Since we began eating out more and consuming more fast food, everyone's weight shifted. Most notably, my father's did. He encouraged me not to eat as much and he began dieting at the same time that I was being pressured to be thinner. When I turned 13, I had dropped a lot of weight and he praised me for being so determined and disciplined. I felt accomplished and content to have made my father proud, but I didn't notice the toll that would take on the rest of my life. I knew that I would be praised for self-monitoring my food consumption and my weight. The reinforcement that I received from him made me view being thinner and concerned about my

food choices as appropriate.

Having these private issues is tough, but it was much harder when these issues began affecting my daily routine. In high school, there were times when my mother and I would argue about how little food I was consuming. I would refuse to eat a lot at dinner because I knew that the following day I would feel guilty. If only I could have told her that it was not her food I did not want to consume, it was my fear of being overweight that kept me from enjoying that meal with my family. At times, I would feel sluggish and tired from not eating enough, but I had to be strong. This obsession was taking over my life. There was a point where all I would eat was fruit until one day when I could not contain my hunger for substantial meals, or my hunger for a day when I would no longer worry about food, my weight, and trying to achieve a perfect body. From that day on, I began eating normally again. The guilt has lingered deep within [though]; I still sometimes calculate my calorie intake at the end of the day and feel disappointed.

Even though different factors have played a key part in establishing my problem, I am ultimately responsible for allowing the issues to consume my life... I worry constantly about how much I am weighing after a meal, and if I should not eat the rest of the day. I worry about looking thin, or if I am looking bloated; I am trying to please an audience that does not even exist. I have allowed myself to detest the scale when it is just serving its purpose; I see the scale as my mortal enemy. I must come to terms with the fact that this obsession is only hurting me. I am trying to free myself from the bonds of servitude that tell me eating brownies is wrong, but it takes rearranging all of the negative ideas I have built for 7 years about my body... Many scholars write about anorexia, bulimia, and other diseases, but my problem is ignored. I am concerned about my weight constantly, and about what I eat, but I have not crossed over to actually physically damaging my body. I do not have a label, even though I know I have an obsession with food and my weight.

Although this is only my second year [on campus], I am becoming much more conscious of my personal decision to hate my body. I am much more aware that society will always create norms that individuals must fit into, but I have the ultimate power to let go of my obsession with weight. I am afraid that I may never fully recover, I fear that I will always just be “recovering.” However, I hope that one day I can enjoy eating what I would like to and not worry about weight. I believe in living a long, healthy life, but this obsession with my weight and what foods are “good” and “bad” takes up too much of my energy... Instead of learning about ending world hunger or becoming a better citizen, I continue to worry about my weight. Unfortunately, as candid and optimistic for change as I am, I know that deep down I will continue to beat myself up for eating some cookies instead of enjoying them.

AN OBSESSION WITH NUMBERS – TANYA’S STORY

All my life I’ve struggled with my weight, and continue to do so today. Starting at age 4, I began to put on weight each year until, at 13, I weighed 190 pounds at 5' 6". I was constantly criticized by my family because we are Chinese. In Chinese [communities], there are not many overweight teenagers around and being overweight at the age of 13 was not easy. My mom and dad would constantly criticize the foods I was eating and ask me: “Do you really want to eat that?” or tell

me: “Just think about the calories in the pizza you’re about to eat!” Everything to them was a number: my weight, the calorie [count], and my BMI.

Our culture has a lot to do with how my parents viewed what is considered a healthy weight. Because everything was based on numbers, and my weight obviously did not fit into the category of a healthy BMI, my parents were adamant about my losing weight. To tell you the truth, I didn’t see myself as overweight. I was really happy with my own body. I know 190 pounds is not healthy for a 13-year-old, but I was happy. I never had felt insecure because I never compared myself to the girls I saw in the magazines. However, when my parents started to criticize me, I started to notice that my weight was getting out of control. Little by little, my insecurities started to come out.

Eighth grade graduation was slowly approaching and I knew I had to lose weight because my mom had been forcing me to do so. I started to [eliminate] rice from every meal. Pounds started to come off. I started to restrict myself even more, eliminating meat. I lost 20 pounds by the time of my eighth grade graduation. I felt great, but I still wasn’t satisfied. The scale still showed my weight as 170, and at that time, everything I started to view as being healthy depended on the number of my weight. I wanted to lose even more.

I began high school in the fall of 2004 and started to eliminate more foods from my daily meals. By the end of freshman year, I completely eliminated breakfast and dinner... All I would eat was lunch, and lunch [consisted of] two pieces of wheat bread, a slice of ham, and non-fat mayonnaise. When buying these items at the grocery store, I always paid close attention to the amount of calories in each of the items. I literally viewed everything in terms of numbers. I would weigh myself every single day up to senior year to see if I had lost any weight.

By the end of senior year, I had dropped to 134 pounds. Five years [earlier] at age 13, I would have never imagined that I would lose a total of 56 lbs; if I did, I would sure be satisfied. But the crazy part of being obsessed with my weight is that I still was not satisfied. Every time I looked in the mirror, I still saw the 190-pound Tanya that I was five years earlier. I began to starve myself because sometimes when I weighed myself, I would look at the scale and my weight would increase by two or three pounds.

I would go days without eating, and my parents really got worried. They keep telling me that my weight was normal now and that I shouldn’t lose any more weight. When I knew I was going to attend a party or eat at a buffet, I would not eat for about two days prior to the party just so I could indulge myself the day of. At other times, when I would go out with friends and eat more than I normally do, I would then starve myself afterwards for about two days just to lose those extra pounds. I didn’t want to admit to myself that I had some sort of problem because I really didn’t believe I did. But looking back at it now, I know I did have a problem because all I could think about was my weight. Weight became my priority and the scale became my best friend.

I don’t blame my parents at all for making me become obsessed with my weight. I can’t put the blame on anyone actually because I know their intentions at first was to get me to a healthy weight because doctors at the time were also telling me that I did not weigh in the normal category... This class has opened my eyes in so many ways. I learned that the number on the

scale and our BMI do not define who we are or how healthy our body is... Numbers are not everything. I can't say that I have fully overcome my obsession with weight because I'm still struggling... However... I don't starve myself anymore because I can't even imagine going a day without food now. I can't say I'm completely comfortable with my body yet, but I am slowly on the path to it and really hope I do become so in the near future.

TRYING TO FIT THE FAMILY NORM – KYM'S BATTLES WITH WEIGHT

I was never overweight as a child, but when I hit puberty, I began to put on some pounds. Still, I had not yet reached the threshold of overweight. I remember my mother telling me that it horrified her when she saw people who were obese, and even those who were overweight. She would often ask how they lived with themselves, and tell me that I should never reach that level of obesity. My family would often joke that I would end up like them and die early and it made me extremely guilty and angry. They would often compare me to my friends who were what you could call "stick skinny." Perhaps what happened next was a remnant of that comparison.

I remember a time in middle school when I did not eat for one whole week. I was actually really proud of myself. I do not quite recall what made me stop, but after eating an apple one day, I got extreme diarrhea. My whole body was trembling and I felt like I was going to pass out. I could not walk straight. I felt very afraid and figured it was due to the "hunger strike." My next option then was bingeing and purging. This went on for about a month until one day, as I was in the middle of purging, I felt this tremendous strain on my heart. I heard a deep pounding in my ear and everything was wrong. A cold realization came over me and I felt sweaty with chills. I knew this was not supposed to happen. I had heard of models that died years later from heart attacks because they had binged and purged. An incredible wave of fear washed over me. I was not ready to die yet, and I was sure as hell not going to let myself succumb to it just to lose weight. I promised myself I would never do that again...

There was a time when I was older that my mom put me on a restricted diet. I was allowed to eat little to no carbohydrate, [only] vegetables and some meat. Sweets and junk food were out of the question. What drove me crazy was that she would buy them for my sister, who was skinny at the time, and let her eat them. If I was lucky, I would get one small piece of candy or a small handful of chips. I was only allowed half a bag of noodles and she would tell me to put a lot of water in the soup so I would feel fuller. Only that did not work too well, because a little while later I would be hungry again, but I knew I was not allowed to eat the other half until it was the "right" time. I remember being hungry a lot, and it was rather agonizing waiting for the next meal time. I think my mother sympathized with me, but only wanted what was best for me. I kept thinking to myself that she did not want a fat child, but a daughter who was beautiful and thin. A daughter all the men would stop and gaze at, just like the ones who would stare at her...

When my mom started working, I was elated because I could eat whatever I wanted. I started binge eating and would feel happy at first, but then this awful guilt would kick in and I would just feel so awful. I would stuff myself silly. I ate so fast and so hard in that short time frame, that I barely enjoyed [the food]. I felt almost desperate. I would sometimes sneak food into my

room and stash it somewhere she could not see. I always feared she would catch me and yell at me. I was deceiving my mother, who kept a careful eye on my weight and body... I started gaining weight and she threw a fit, accusing me of eating while she was at work and of hiding food in my room. I was so unhappy. I felt so desperate for anything to lose weight, but I could not bring myself to purge again. The fear was too great.

I would not say that I had or have an eating disorder. However, I do constantly monitor my weight and often feel guilt if I eat more than I should. The thought of gaining weight bothers me greatly, but not to the extent that I would let it consume my life. It does occupy my mind often enough that I feel distressed by my body and my looks... I always compare myself to other girls... and feel a little bitter that I cannot be as skinny as they are. I have lost about 15 pounds since high school, through no dieting or much exercising but not by unhealthy ways either. I am a bit happier but there is always that thought, “if only I could lose a few more pounds I would be happier”...

TRYING TO BECOME A REAL AMERICAN – GALI’S EFFORTS TO BELONG

This paper is about someone who was very close to me, my cousin Galina, who came to the U.S. at the age of 12... Gali was like one of my sisters. I looked up to her and we spent countless hours together talking and simply being there for one another.

I remember one day she came home from school crying, because students had thrown gum in her hair because she had an accent and couldn’t really keep up in school. She sat down with me in the small apartment where a family of nine was living and said, “I don’t look like the other girls at school.” She wanted to dress like the other girls and to look like what we saw in the magazines on Saturday mornings when we went down the street to Rite Aid to get a single scoop of ice cream. Gali was at this point in middle school; she was embarrassed by her style of clothing, and told me that she was always made fun of because of her looks. My aunt didn’t really listen to her and said that it was a part of growing up, that there would always be bullies in middle school, but to know that our beauty was skin deep. Gali, who was always thin, started to blame her weight for her inability to keep up in school and being made fun of. She would come home crying and I felt helpless because there was nothing I could tell her that would make her feel beautiful, strong, or intelligent.

At 15 she began to starve herself. She would look in the mirror every day and say: “I am fat; if I want to have friends in school, I need to be a lot skinnier”.... [Although she was] living in a house with nine people, her behavior and relentless hours of exercise went unnoticed. We lived in an apartment complex, and I remember how she would run around the park area, stopping and doing jumping jacks, sit-ups, and [other] exhausting routines... At times I would go to her room, and I would see her drenched in sweat, lying on the floor fatigued and lifeless. I couldn’t stand the sight of her sometimes, and it pained me to watch her do this to herself. When I told her older sibling, Anora, who was at the time transitioning into her first year at USC, she said Gali would get over it. When we would have to meet up for family dinner, Gali would ask me to tell the family that she had a large lunch, or that she was packed with homework and could hardly

keep up. I found myself making up excuses for her each time, but no one seemed to notice or question what she was really up to. I recall some of the things I saw her eat... such as a piece of cheese with a tomato on top. I knew our days of laughing and going down the street for a single scoop were over, and I feared that her behavior would have a [serious] impact on her life.

[Within] a few months, Gali had lost about 15 pounds. She came home from school and told me that she had gotten invited by a group of friends for dinner and a movie. She said, "I think it's all worth it now; they don't make fun of my accent, and they actually want to hang out with me." At this point, I wasn't happy for her; to the contrary, I was angry. Nevertheless, I went to the mall with her to pick out something to wear for the night. [At the mall I] told her that she needed to start taking better care of herself, before her anorexia got serious. I told her that night, before she went out, that if she cared for me -- the one person who loved her with all her heart -- she would stop destroying her body. She would stop internalizing all this hate towards her body because she was new to this country, she was an immigrant, and the only way to "fit in" in her eyes was to be thin. That night she cried and told me that she had never been so happy, but had not realized how she had hurt me so much. I guess I was the only one who had paid attention to her absurd behavior. She promised she would work on it...

Two days later she was in urgent care with an IV in her, looking emaciated and weak. My family was angry. Everyone had to be at work so we could support each other and pay for all the expenses. The transition into this country wasn't an easy one, and Gali's anorexia had become a burden, an additional problem we had to worry about... Even when she was in the hospital for three days, no one really paid attention to her but me. After she was released from the hospital, her anorexia did not become more severe, although she continued to abuse her body through constant exercise, but she internalized this sense of anger and didn't care about anyone or anything.

During high school she was rebellious, [and] her weight began fluctuating. I noticed her bingeing a few times after school with three different bags of chips in her backpack. I honestly do not know how you go from starving yourself to shoving junk food down your throat, but I saw this vicious cycle occur to my cousin. By the time she graduated from high school, she had gained over 25 pounds. I have not seen my cousin since her high school graduation, and have no clue if she is even alive. I look back to pictures of us together and cry because this was someone that I loved so very much. She was always trying to keep up with the beauty myth, looking at others and saying, "I need to be that," or "I want to have that body." I can honestly say that having no family intervention -- because everyone else was trying to socially integrate into this country -- fueled her behavior. I can only hope that people with eating problems are able to find ways to cope and realize that they are worth far more than their physical appearance...