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LOSING TO LIVE: Woman turns to surgery to help shed hundreds of pounds



STAN LIM/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jennifer Garcia laughs as her children Karissa, 5, and Lyriq, 2, play outside their home in Moreno Valley.

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A Text Size

BY DAVID OLSON | STAFF WRITER | January 26, 2014; 01:31 PM

As she thinks about what she has never done with her children — trips to Disneyland, the zoo, the movies — Jennifer Garcia begins to cry.

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LOSING TO LIVE: Woman turns to surgery

It's her weight, on this day 505 pounds, that keeps her confined in her Moreno Valley home while her kids go on excursions with others.

Seeing her mother's tears, 5-year-old Karissa runs to the bathroom and brings back a tissue.

"I'm one of her little helpers," Karissa says.

It is Garcia's love for Karissa and her brother, Lyriq, 2, that finally pushed her to confront the eating habits that have been her comfort and her enemy.

Garcia, who is 29, weighed 555 pounds in April when she went to see Dr. Ninh Nguyen. He told her she risked not seeing Karissa and Lyriq graduate high school if she didn't lose much of her weight.

Faced with that grim prospect, the 5-foot-2 Garcia embarked on a years-long effort to lose up to 350 pounds.

She'd have to undergo surgery. She'd have to radically change her life, abandoning the way she has eaten since childhood and substituting robust exercise for a sedentary lifestyle.

A hereditary predisposition to obesity and a body that resists a dramatic drop in weight would work against her.

But the thought of the alternative, of giving up, scares her.

"I don't want to leave my children. I don't want to die. I want to be able to take them to school and take them to the classroom. I want to be there to see them have kids and be a grandmother and grow old with them. The way I am now, I won't be able to make it."

Garcia agreed to tell her story in the hope it will help others.

For many people of Garcia's weight, Nguyen wouldn't recommend surgery. The risks are too high.

But Garcia's youth means her body would likely tolerate the trauma of an operation to remove 80 percent of her stomach, reducing the amount of food she could take in. Nguyen recommended a procedure called a vertical sleeve gastrectomy, which Nguyen says is safer — especially for extremely obese people — than the two other most common weight-loss surgeries.

The possibility of complications for someone as obese as Garcia is five times higher than it is for a typical patient, Nguyen says. But without the surgery, Garcia's blood pressure would continue to rise, joints already damaged by sustaining 555 pounds of pressure would deteriorate further, diabetes likely would develop and other health problems would arise, leading to a strong chance of death by middle age.

"I don't think she has much other choice," Nguyen says.

LIFETIME OF WEIGHT PROBLEMS

Garcia has been overweight since her childhood in Corona.

Much of the food she ate at home was fried or covered in thick gravy. Cookies, chips and sugary sodas were plentiful, both at home and in high school vending machines, and she devoured them, along with lots of fast food.

"I would overindulge because I never felt full," Garcia says.

Garcia was raised by obese parents, and Nguyen says heredity almost surely is a factor in Garcia's lifelong weight problem.

The extra pounds led to harassment.

Garcia says she endured jokes and taunts in high school and sometimes got in fights. She fell into

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a bad crowd. She started using methamphetamines. She dropped out of school.

“For such a long time, I didn’t want to grow up,” Garcia says. “I didn’t want to be responsible for someone other than myself.”

In 2010, Garcia’s ex-boyfriend — daughter Karissa’s father — called state Child Protective Services complaining that Garcia was inviting people to her home to do drugs. The state later took Karissa away and put her in foster care.

A judge ordered Garcia to seek treatment for her meth addiction. After losing custody of the most important person in her life, Garcia was ready to clean up her life.

Garcia says she weighed 250 pounds when she started three months in a Riverside drug rehabilitation center. As she struggled to quit meth, she was faced with the unlimited food available at the rehab center, the emotional trauma of living apart from her daughter, the residual pain of domestic violence from an ex-boyfriend and a second pregnancy. When she left rehab, she continued to eat voraciously: burgers, buffalo wings, tacos, pizza, chips. Within a year, her weight had doubled to 500 pounds.

SHAME AND DEPRESSION

Garcia regained custody of Karissa after completing 11 months of outpatient treatment. Lyriq, born while she was still in rehab, had been in foster care, too, and also was returned to her. But her food addiction was unabated.

Garcia continued to gain weight, and moving became more difficult. She started spending most of her days in bed. Depression took hold. She sometimes hated herself.

“I was ashamed,” she says. “I couldn’t believe I let it get this far. By the time I realized it had happened, it was so far out of control that I didn’t think I could do anything about it.”

Garcia couldn’t restrain herself when she ate. She didn’t think of the consequences. Eating made her feel better.

“Meth was like a hug in a bag,” Garcia says. “It was the same thing with food.”

To help escape the lure of meth and her meth-using friends, Garcia moved from Riverside to Moreno Valley. But the food she ate to comfort herself was everywhere, in grocery store aisles, in television commercials, at fast-food restaurants a few blocks from her home.

After Garcia had ballooned past 500 pounds, she had wrenching conversations with her daughter. Although she is only 5, Karissa understands that being as overweight as her mom isn’t healthy.

“The worst thing she’s ever told me is she was afraid I wouldn’t wake up in the morning,” Garcia says.

She has tried to prepare Karissa for a life without a mother.

“I’ve had to talk to her and say, ‘If something happens to Mommy, I’ll always be here,’” Garcia says, pointing to her heart.

In late 2012, in the dark of her despair, she began to see hope. Garcia’s mother, Tamara Brostrom, 55, and stepfather, George Brostrom, 51, underwent gastric bypass surgery, in which most of the stomach is sealed off so food enters a small pouch, limiting the amount of food that can be eaten at one sitting.

Eating less and exercising regularly dropped Tamara Brostrom’s weight from 339 to 200 pounds today, and George Brostrom’s from 329 to 189. Years ago, they had lost about 100 pounds through dieting but gained it back. This time, they have kept it off for more than a year and made vigorous exercise a routine.

Without having to say a word, they showed Garcia that losing weight is possible. Maybe she wasn’t destined to always weigh 500 pounds. She began thinking of surgery.

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Garcia had quit meth for her children. The next step was to lose enough weight to stay alive for them.

The first doctor Garcia saw said he couldn't treat her. Then she found Nguyen, who put her on a strict low-calorie, low-fat, low-carbohydrate diet to make the surgery less risky. The doctor also viewed the regimen as a test of Garcia's determination.

Garcia lost nearly 50 pounds over several months on the diet. Still, in October, when she had surgery, she had a body mass index of 92.4 — four times the norm of 18.5 to 24.9. Over a span of 15 years and 2,000 patients, Nguyen — a weight-loss surgery specialist and president of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery — had never had a surgical patient with a BMI that high.

ROBBED OF MEMORIES

Garcia says she has tried to be as much a part of her children's lives as possible. But her face turns downcast when she talks of how the father and sister of Karissa's dad's girlfriend — and not Garcia — accompanied Karissa to the Los Angeles Zoo. That's the type of outing Karissa will reminisce about when she's older, Garcia says. And it hurts her to know she won't be part of those memories.

"I can't do regular things with them," Garcia says. "I can't walk down the street with them. I can't play with them in the park. I can't play soccer with them. I can't go swimming with them. I can't take them to Disneyland. They've never seen the snow or been to the beach, because I can't walk very far."

Karissa sometimes talks of the trips she will take with her mom, once she loses weight. She's always encouraging her.

"I like it when my mommy loses weight," Karissa says, and she especially likes that it's "because mommy loves us."

The support motivates Garcia, who has "Karissa" tattooed on her left arm and "Lyriq" on her left hand.

Karissa has never said so, but "I feel like she's disappointed in me, like I'm letting her down," Garcia says.

Glancing at Lyriq, she adds, "He's so young that he doesn't understand."

In August, Garcia was resolved to watch her daughter start kindergarten. When she got out of a car driven by her boyfriend's sister-in-law, Garcia looked at the daunting distance to the door of the school dozens of feet away. She told herself she would not give up.

It wasn't easy physically — or emotionally. Garcia braced herself for the stares she knew would come. They started soon after she got out of the car, from students and their parents. She tried not to focus on them, instead thinking of the pride she'd feel seeing Karissa sit down at her desk.

Garcia was lucky her daughter's classroom was near the front door, and that there were benches on the way where she could rest and catch her breath. She made it. But it was physically excruciating. She hadn't walked that far in two years.

"It hurt — my back, my legs burned," she says.

Even at home, moving is a struggle.

Garcia can't walk straight because her belly falls between her legs, so her feet aren't parallel when they move. She waddles, as she describes it, to shift the weight.

When she cooks dinner, she sits in a chair with a sagging cushion, scooting from the stove to the fridge to the sink.

The chair is the second she's used in the past year. The first collapsed after a few months. The one she's using now has wobbly legs. She wonders how long it will last.

Garcia's furniture wears out easily. She has to replace her box-spring mattress every six months. Shoes, socks, clothes — all fall apart quickly.

Garcia's weight controls almost every part of her life. She had to remove the glass doors of her bathtub and replace them with curtains because she couldn't fit in the tub. She can only buy mail-order clothes. Even plus-size stores don't sell clothing that fits her.

Garcia bathes herself three times a day to keep clean, making sure every crack and crevice underneath the rolls of skin on her body are dry. Otherwise, Nguyen says, moisture trapped in the folds of her skin could become infected.

On a recent afternoon, Lyriq is running around the living room, and the family Chihuahua, Sancho, is perched on Garcia's shoulder when Karissa arrives from school.

Garcia asks her about her homework and looks through her pink Hello Kitty backpack, lifting out "I Love You When You Smile," a book Karissa borrowed from the library.

"After homework, we'll read it," Garcia says.

It was Oct. 28, two days before surgery. And three days before Halloween.

"Just think about it," Karissa says. "Next year, Mommy, we'll be able to take you trick-or-treating."

SURGERY DAY

After a night of little sleep, Garcia is ready when her mother and stepfather pick her up in the pre-dawn darkness, arriving at UC Irvine Medical Center in Orange three hours before her 7:45 a.m. appointment.

The clock on the waiting room wall passes 8 a.m., 8:30 a.m., 9 a.m., 9:30 a.m.

"I just want to get back there and do it already," Garcia says, her eyes darting around and her left leg bouncing up and down.

Tamara Brostrom sits a few feet away from her daughter and talks of how her life has changed since her surgery. Her clothes and shoe sizes shrunk. She walks two miles a day, cycles daily and swims five days a week. A broken ankle has kept her down for a few weeks, and she's eager to get back into her routine.

"Before, I was lucky if I could walk three blocks," says Brostrom, who now looks forward to the outings — and can't wait to have her daughter join her.

Brostrom feels better psychologically as well as physically.

"I have a better outlook on life," she says.

Garcia knows losing weight won't be easy. Even people who have undergone surgery to make their stomachs smaller can remain obese or gain back much of the weight. Instead of gorging on food, they switch to eating smaller portions all day long.

Garcia is unlikely to return to 555 pounds, Nguyen says. But to reach a target weight in the low 200s and stay there, she'll need to maintain a healthy diet and a regular exercise regimen, he says. She may need to undergo a second operation, a gastric bypass. Even after that, she probably will never weigh 125, the normal weight for a 5-foot-2-inch woman.

Garcia has no illusions.

"I don't want to be skinny," she says, "I want to be healthy. As long as I can go out in society and do the things you do in life. I go out now, and I feel like a freak. I feel people are out there staring and pointing at me."

In her monthly trips to WinCo, Costco and Wal-Mart for groceries, other shoppers snicker and make cruel comments and jokes as she passes by in a motorized wheelchair.

With her difficulty moving, Garcia can't get a job. She and her children now subsist primarily on government aid. Medi-Cal is paying for the surgery. Garcia says that once she is physically able to work, she looks forward to getting a job — perhaps as a correctional officer — and getting off public assistance so she can give her kids the life she wants for them.

Finally, a smiling Garcia is wheeled back to the pre-surgery area — only to be told later that the operation would be delayed by four hours. Her dietitian and social worker check how she's doing. Behavioral therapy, counseling and continuing dietary guidance are crucial to Garcia's success, Nguyen says.

At 1:45 p.m., nine hours after Garcia arrived at the hospital and seven months after she began her weight-loss journey, Garcia is on the operating table. The surgery takes less than two hours. Nguyen uses a camera inserted through Garcia's abdomen to look inside her body as he removes most of her stomach and staples together the remaining part, which is one-fifth as large.

48 POUNDS LIGHTER

Three weeks later, Garcia strides through the offices of the medical center's Comprehensive Digestive Disease Center for her first follow-up visit.

Before the surgery she never would have been able to walk so far without stopping.

She gets onto the scale: 457 pounds. She's already 48 pounds lighter than the day of surgery.

"You've come a long way," social worker Janet Ramirez says. "It's amazing. You're always in good spirits, and that's going to help you all along."

Garcia says she feels a lot more full after eating than she did before the surgery. She now regularly leaves food on the plate.

By early January, Garcia is down to 440 pounds. Nguyen congratulates her on her progress but urges her to push herself to exercise more.

The more weight Garcia loses, the less difficult exercise becomes, and as she exercises more, she can lose even more weight, Nguyen says.

As each day goes by, Garcia walks further down the street in front of her duplex, often with one hand holding Karissa's, the other clasping Lyriq's. She goes on shopping trips with her mom. She buys clothes off the rack for the first time in years. Her old size 8X clothes are getting loose.

She can fit behind the wheel of a car, and her boyfriend has bought her a used Honda Accord. Garcia had always wanted to go on a mommy-daughter shopping trip, just Karissa and her. One night, they spend hours together shopping, first at Family Dollar, then at Ross Dress for Less, then at Wal-Mart and Target.

It was tough spending so much time on her feet. She was worn out when she got home.

"To me it's a good feeling, to be able to feel that tiredness," Garcia says. "I felt like I earned that exhaustion."

At home, she no longer has to sit inside and listen to her kids play outside. She's now in the front yard with them, chasing after Lyriq and throwing an inflatable ball to a laughing Karissa.

In only a few weeks, Garcia's life has changed dramatically. Her dreams of running around with her children, of driving a car, of walking through a store without using a wheelchair, are coming true. She is regaining her independence and, she says, her dignity.

"It's been a long time coming," she says. "But it's going to be a long road ahead of me."

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