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Seeking fat acceptance

Size-tolerance activists envision a day 'when fat phobia becomes as intolerable as racism.'

By Marnell Jameson

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Getting heavy people to feel comfortable in their skin, however ample, and focus on healthy behaviors is only half the fat-acceptance battle; the other half is getting society to make room for fat people.

Marilyn Wann of San Francisco is among the nation's fat activists. She became passionate about defending the rights of fat people when she was denied health insurance based solely on her weight. That same week, a guy she'd been seeing told her he was embarrassed to introduce her to his friends because of her body.

"If I'd kept silent, I would be yielding to discrimination," said Wann, who is 43, 5 feet 4 and 290 pounds, and considers herself a healthy, physically active person. "I don't think anyone should be excluded from love or rights based on weight."

So, like growing numbers of Americans in recent years, she spoke up. She started a zine for fat people, wrote the book "Fat!So?" and helped pass an ordinance in San Francisco making it illegal to discriminate based on height and weight. She now does corporate training to promote fat acceptance in the workplace. She'd like to change two beliefs: that people chose what they weigh, and that weight equals health. Both are false, she says.

Size tolerance, fat-acceptance activists say, should be right up there with religious tolerance, ethnic tolerance and gay tolerance. "It's the culture that has to change," says Judith Matz, director of the Chicago Center for Overcoming Overeating. "I look forward to the day when fat phobia becomes as intolerable as racism." Joanne Ikeda is emeritus professor of nutrition at UC Berkeley, where she taught nutritional sciences for 37 years. She's also a member of the National Assn. to Advance Fat Acceptance. "I joined NAAFA because I wanted to hear these people's stories, and get insight into their experiences. When I heard people talk about going to the grocery store and having strangers take food out of their carts, I wanted to cry."

Ikeda, who is 65, 5 feet 2 and 190 pounds with a BMI of 34.7, says others make unfair and untrue assumptions about fat people. "People assume if you're heavy, that you're lazy, and that you have no self-control . . . They think you're stupid, and don't exercise. If I could give one message, it would be, 'Don't prejudge.' "

Most people feel ambivalent about fat people, says Lesleigh Owen of Monrovia, who is president of the Los Angeles chapter of NAAFA. "They think they should treat people well regardless of their size, but also view them as a big problem driving up healthcare costs. Owen, who is 35, 5-feet-7 and 360 pounds, teaches sociology at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga. She's married and likes how she looks. She swims and belly dances. "I consider myself very healthy, and I think my doctor would agree."

"When people say fatties are driving up the healthcare costs, I want to point out how arbitrary that is that they would single out that group and not the people who talk on their cellphones while driving, or who don't wear helmets or seat belts, or who drive too fast, or who are stressed out all the time. Where's the hue and cry about them?"

"It's true, we shouldn't judge people by their weight," says Janet Pregler, director of the Iris Cantor-UCLA Women's Health Center and a professor of clinical medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "Obesity is not their fault. But it isn't true that we should stop trying to help them."

Meanwhile, folks like Wann, Ikeda and Owen are trying -- not for thinness, but for overall good health. Not for personal acceptance, which they've achieved, but for more acceptance from society. And they're gaining it -- slowly.

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