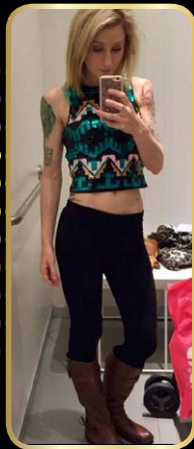
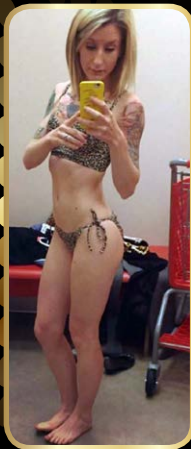


2017 Best Self Atlanta Magazine Courage Award Finalist

ASHLEY HENDRIKSON

BEFORE



AFTER



Two years ago, I was hungry. And I loved it. The emptiness I felt after going as long as I could without eating left me feeling satisfied enough.

"You're so skinny, you look great!" I would hear daily, fueling my secret obsession of watching my weight drop.

My secret became apparent when family, whom I had not seen in years, visited to celebrate my daughter's birthday. Their whispers of my condition were as loud as shouts in uncomfortable silences. Instead of eyes being on my daughter as she devoured her cake, eyes were on me to see if I would eat it. To appease them, I tried to convince myself that just one slice of cake wouldn't be detrimental to my goal of hunger. I could not take one bite. The thought of it made me sick, I would not be able to forgive myself.

It was then that I realized that I was no longer in control of my body as I previously thought, anorexia controlled me. I cried silent tears that night as I begged God for help, searching for a solution.

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"The gym was never just a hobby. The gym saved my life."

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Monday was a new beginning. I entered a local gym in baggy clothes, intimidated, embarrassed and afraid but seeking help to change my life.

"Working out" was something I had no clue how to do. My credit card balance grew as I desperately hired a personal trainer.

Physical challenges were easy, mental challenges were terrifying. Forcing myself to eat seven times daily, numbers on the scale rose. Daily, I had to shut out the voice inside of me telling me to stop eating. My body began to change, but more importantly I began to *feel* differently.

Looking in the mirror, I *liked* what I saw; seeing what my body can do encouraged me to continue to grow and push weight as if my life depended on it. Instead of being obsessed with hunger, I am now obsessed with iron, testing my body's limits and surpassing them. 52 pounds later I am finally at peace with who I am, what I see looking back at me in the mirror, and setting a positive example for my young daughter. Hearing her small voice say, "When I get 'old', I want big muscles like my Momma!" is a feeling unlike any other. The gym was never just a hobby. The gym saved my life.

Today, I aspire to obtain my own personal training certification in hopes that I can inspire even just one person to overcome an obstacle that is standing in the way of their own happiness. Life is too short to live with dissatisfaction and unhappiness, and the gym unlocked mine.