



Profile: Dani Parr (May 2016)

BY GRACE WEBB

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hen you walk into Dani Parr’s garage, a printed sign taped to the wall will quickly catch your attention: “All the things I thought I would never do.” Medals from races hang to the left of the sign, while registration numbers cluster in a wide arc above. Tucked in the middle is a photo collection of shots featuring Parr participating in various fitness activities.

The photos show a pretty, vivacious woman, one who's impressively fit and full of energy. They're a far cry from how Parr looked—and felt—six years ago, when she weighed 280 pounds.

Parr, 47, was always in shape as a kid and in her young adult years, especially while she served in the Army Reserves. But a rocky marriage and difficult divorce drove her to find comfort in food. Eventually, she decided enough was enough—it was time to take back her health. First came a gastric bypass surgery in 2010, then the long, slow road to getting back in shape, one step and one bite at a time.

But even as Parr saw herself change into the healthy woman she always wanted to be, she knew it wasn't enough. She wanted to help other people facing the same struggles.

"I made a vow that if I had the opportunity to lose weight, I was going to try to help other people in whatever way I could," she explained.

Tell us a little about your background.

I grew up in Owatonna and joined the Army Reserves right out of high school. I was in for 14 years, from 1986 to the end of 1999. When I was 24, I became pregnant with my son, Josh, and I gained 100 pounds. Afterwards, I managed to lose it in about a year and a half. But, slowly but surely, food just became my friend. I got out of the Army when Josh was five, raising him as a single mother. I didn't have to worry about physical training anymore. I just didn't care anymore. There was so much addiction in my family, and food became mine.

I got married in 2004, and that wasn't the best choice. He had an affair eight months after we got married, so I ate those feelings. I was already heavy when we got married, around 190 pounds; after that affair, I got up to 280 lbs.

What made you change things?

I just decided I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. I had crossed the line into being pre-diabetic, and I was using a CPAP Machine at night while I slept. Everything hurt: my knees, my hips, my back. I would lose weight but then gain it back—and then some. I just kept self-sabotaging. I always felt like I wasn't worthy, like I wasn't good enough to be thin. That's still a work in progress. I want other women to know that we're all human and we all deserve it. People need to know that—that they're worth more than they give themselves credit for.

When I was 41, I decided to have gastric bypass surgery. At the time, I thought, "That's such a cop out." But it's not an easy fix; you still have to work at staying healthy afterward. The whole surgery process was horrible. I remember thinking, "Who the heck thought this was a good idea?" You pretty much starve for the first few weeks. It was really miserable.

How did you get back into shape afterwards?

I immediately started exercising; I didn't let any grass grow under my feet. First, I started walking. I was excited about having the opportunity to work out again. It was a chance to do something for me for the first time in a really long time.

There were parts that were very challenging. When I started losing weight, I was so good at looking at the ground because I felt like everyone was judging me. People would give me dirty looks, like, "You don't need to be eating that." I remember some of the comments they made to me... I quit going to the gym because I was so mortified by what they were thinking and saying.

Yet you persevered and even became a fitness instructor.

I kept getting these feelings that I was supposed to become a personal trainer, so I started looking around. I found a course through the National Academy of Sports Medicine and earned my certificate in about six months. Then I became a women's fitness specialist and a nutrition specialist, too.

You opened Dani's Lifestyle Fitness Studio in March 2015. How did that come to be?

Opening that studio was a huge step for me because I felt really called to do it but it was really outside my comfort zone. Growing up, I was always told that I was dumb and stupid and never going to amount to anything. I believed it most of my life. When God called me to open the studio, I was really outside of where I was comfortable. That was hard for me, to believe and trust, because I don't trust very easily.

At the time, I was teaching classes out of my basement, and I had a waiting list of 20 people who wanted me to have openings. One of my clients said, "My husband has space you can use." I didn't know if I could commit. So I prayed about it: "God, if this is something you want me to do, open the doors. If it's not, close them." Things just started opening up right and left.

The studio closed almost exactly a year later. How did you feel about such a short run?

I consider myself very blessed. At first I felt like a failure, and that I'd let God down. But there were a lot of connections I made there. The solid lifetime friendships that came out of that were a huge blessing. For me, there's a lot to be thankful for.

What's next?

Right now, I'm working on opportunities to teach fitness classes in other area gyms. Some things are in the works. I'm excited to find other ways to help people. I love making people feel special. People should know how special they are.