



After 14-year struggle, anorexic finds new life in recovery

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Anna Velasco -- The Birmingham News



Karen Wright, standing with Dr. Kenneth Olson, the medical doctor who saw her through numerous hospitalizations over seven years, while holding all the scales she's given up over the years. (Special)

Many times Karen Wright wanted to die.

Her body was so malnourished that death, at times, was not far away.

For 14 years, Wright has suffered from anorexia nervosa. It started in her late 20s as her marriage came to an end. While the stresses of being a stay-at-home mom with an unraveling marriage mounted, Wright began to feel like she was losing control. She discovered that restricting her food allowed her to lose weight and gain control over some part of her life.

The illness hit full throttle in 2002, when she gave up fighting for custody of her two sons, now 15 and 17, who have lived with their father since their parents' divorce.

But today the 41-year-old counts herself as a survivor. Last summer she had a series of breakthroughs that gave her

the courage to imagine life free of her eating disorder. She wanted to be well enough to show her boys how to water ski. She wanted to cycle with her younger son. She wanted to start taking college courses and play clarinet again. She started making friends outside her eating disorder network.

"I started looking for the life I wanted to recover to," Wright said recently. "These were the small, risky baby steps that I took."

Although recovery takes time, Dr. Emily Whitt, a clinical psychologist and Wright's therapist since early 2009, said she believes Wright is in the recovery process.

She said Wright's long struggle is not uncommon for anorexia.

"It's a very powerful illness," Whitt said. "The restricting and starvation process can become very addictive. It is the most deadly psychiatric illness there is."

Much of her 30s is a hazy memory for Wright. She moved back in with her mother. Wright said she spent one 15-month stretch at her mother's house basically in bed, getting out only to go to the doctor or psychiatrist. Many weekends she was too weak to enjoy her sons' visits. She was hospitalized more times than she can remember, both for malnutrition and psychiatric problems.

At her lowest, the 5-foot, 8½-inch Wright weighed only 105 pounds. Over the years her eating disorder served many roles. It was her way of exerting control when she felt out of control in other aspects of her life. It was an external expression of internal pain. It numbed her to other painful feelings. It was a cry for attention. It offered companionship.

"It's a maladaptive coping skill," Wright said.

Wright admits that over the years she was not a compliant patient and was often combative. She's been in residential treatment centers four times, the last two times at Magnolia Creek Residential Treatment Center in Chelsea. During that last stay, in fall 2008, Wright said she was finally able to get to the core issue -- feelings of rejection and abandonment.

"I kept telling myself, 'It's not about the food. It's something else. You've got to get to it,'" Wright said.

Even after the revelation, Wright relapsed and began losing weight again. But then one day last summer, her boys were having trouble getting up on skis, and she got in the water to show them how to do it. She did, but her body was weak and she realized as malnourished as she was, she could have a heart attack.

She started taking control over her eating disorder, instead of allowing it to control her. Wright broke her scale in August and hasn't bought another one since. She's slipped a few times and weighed herself in stores, but she's winning the battle. She has maintained a healthy weight since August.

In January, Dr. A. Kenneth Olson, the medical doctor specializing in nutrition who cared for her since 2003 through

numerous hospitalizations, released her from his care. He said she "graduated" because she was no longer medically unstable.

"She was so proud," Olson said. "Hers is a tremendous outcome. She's the best I've ever seen her."

The Birmingham area now has multiple treatment options for people with eating disorders. Besides the residential care at Magnolia Creek, Eating Disorder Center of Alabama and A Center for Eating Disorders both offer various forms of outpatient treatment.

One of the loves Wright left behind in high school was marching with the band. She spent her 20s as a wife and mother and didn't go to college. Now a student at Jefferson State Community College, Wright wants to gain a spot on the Color Guard at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She tries out on Saturday.

"I'm sure I'm going to be the oldest person ever to try out for this," she said. "But I want to do it for me. I have recurring dreams about marching on that field again."

Wright has restored relationships with her family.

She has a part-time job that still allows her to take college courses. She is getting to do the things with her children that mothers do, like get them ready for their proms.

"They can pick up the phone and call me, and they're not going to get a half-dead mother," Wright said. "I wake up in the mornings, and instead of being obsessed with running to the scale, I think, 'What do I get to do today?'"

E-mail: avelasco@bhamnews.com.

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