

Weight: My Life in Pounds

By Russell Rawlings

The stigma of obesity was hammered home to me at an early age. I was in the second grade at Wells School and my teacher was the beloved Miss Barnes. This was 60 years ago, so apparently it left a mark.

It started out like any other school day. Our “board work” was waiting for us on the chalkboard as we settled into our desks, and Principal Dickens provided the day’s announcements over the intercom. Miss Barnes instructed us to begin working on our assignments, which consisted of some spelling and arithmetic followed by reading. The goal was to keep us quiet and occupied until recess at 10:15.

Then she pulled out the bathroom scales and a yardstick.

“While you’re doing your work this morning,” she proclaimed, “I will be calling you up to get your height and weight. Just keep working until I call your name.” In all honesty, I don’t remember what she said. All I heard was the word “weight,” accompanied by the realization that I would be stepping on the scales in front of the entire class.

It was certainly no secret that I was the largest person in our class. There was one other poor soul in our grade who was giving me a run for my money, but we weren’t in the same class that year. My only hope, and it was really more of a prayer, was that I had not crossed the dreaded 100-pound threshold.

But it wasn’t even close. At 108 pounds, the running joke was, I weighed more than the rest of my row. Combined.

We had a set of bathroom scales at the fraternity house that only went up to 250 pounds. They may have been the same scales Miss Barnes used 15 years earlier! All I knew was that every time I ever stepped on them until spring of my senior year in college, the result was always the same: 250 pounds.

Which begs an obvious question – how was it that I knew I weighed 320 pounds when I began the diet of my lifetime in January of 1978? The answer is that I rode out to the local office of the American Tobacco Co., where my father worked, and weighed on the same scales that they used to weigh tobacco. It was an impressive piece of equipment, completely mechanical, and the starting weight was offset minus a few pounds to account for the basket on which the tobacco was transported.

As the spring of 1978 progressed, I continued to test the scales at the fraternity house, and for several months the result continued to be 250 pounds. But I knew I was losing weight because my clothes were getting looser by the week, and other people were starting to notice too. Barton College, known then as Atlantic Christian College, was and

is a small school. Likewise for the Gamma Lambda Chapter of Alpha Sigma Phi Fraternity. For better or worse, everyone knows everyone's business, but for the first time in my life people were starting to notice my weight in a positive light, and that was awesome. They were pulling for me, and that was awesome too.

As the semester drew to a close in April and graduation loomed in May, I found myself abstaining from the food and drink that permeated the fraternity house on a Saturday night. By this time I was locked in on a personal mission, and even though the Pi's were sharing their keg right across the street, I had more important business on my mind.

It was time to move the needle, literally. And sure enough, as I stepped on the scales that had previously only rendered a steadfast 250 pounds, something felt different. The needle didn't bounce back when it completed its clockwise journey from 0 to 250; it didn't get to 250 at all. No one has ever been happier to weigh 248 pounds. I still had a long way to go and I knew it; I was not satisfied with losing "only" 72 pounds. But I was very happy!

The University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City will always hold a special place in my heart. It was directly across the street from the motel at which we always stayed when Atlantic Christian College competed in the national tennis tournament. I was not a member of the team, mind you, but back in my sportswriter days it was my good fortune to accompany Coach Tom Parham and his players to the national tournament on multiple occasions.

Our championship teams of 1979 and 1984 were special, but my fondest memories will always be of the 1978 team that finished second. We had a great week and let the tennis world know that we were coming back for the crown the following year, but my special memories have nothing to do with lobs and volleys and aces and upsets.

On the final night of our stay, when the team results were sealed and only individual championships remained to be decided between players from other schools, our team – i.e. my classmates – proceeded to celebrate their unprecedented accomplishment. I begged off, uncharacteristically, in part because I had work to do, but more so for because I knew that somewhere within the vast medical complex across the street there had to be a set of scales I could use.

The receptionist didn't quite know what to make of me, a seemingly healthy young man requesting to check his weight. But somewhere between a condensed version of my weight-loss journey and my driver's license photo, she acquiesced and showed me to the scales. Today I would find the verdict – 220 pounds – to be totally unacceptable. But at the very moment, confirming that I had in fact lost 100 pounds in five months, it was the happiest I had ever been in my life.

Opinions, expert and otherwise, vary on how often we should weigh. Our health and well-being certainly involve more than a mere number on the scales – much more! But weight is definitely a factor, and for most of us it is the measuring stick against which we monitor our progress, or lack thereof, in the ongoing battle with our weight. And it is a battle for so many of us – frankly more people than I ever would have imagined when I began this part of my journey back in 1978.

I look upon weight as the CPA of my body. “Mr. Rawlings, this is what you consumed, this is what you burned, this is what you weigh.” Straight up, honest and objective, no excuses and no exceptions. Some weeks it makes me feel good and some weeks it makes me feel bad. But every week, and that is how often I weigh, my weight provides me with an important data point through which I can assess where I got it right and where I went wrong over the preceding seven days.

The weigh-ins will never be as traumatic for me as they were 60 years ago when I was in the second grade, nor will they ever be as emotional as they were when I was losing weight in college. But, be it a blessing or a curse, my weight will always matter to me, and it will always be a part of my journey.

If weight is part of your journey, too, I encourage you to be positive. Life hits us with a lot of pitches – curveballs and fastballs alike – but unlike baseball, we don’t always know what direction they’re coming from. Take it easy on yourself!

And remember, some days just hanging in there is a win. A very big win.

Russell Rawlings serves as director of external affairs and communications for the North Carolina Bar Association and welcomes the opportunity to write and speak about weight and wellness.