

# We Did It

## 5 Division 9 Members Share Ups and Downs of Life Post-Op

By Kelly James-Enger

Every TOPS member knows how challenging losing weight—and keeping it off for good—can be. While TOPS focuses on developing healthier eating habits and becoming more active to lose weight, some members have turned to gastric bypass surgery as an additional weight-loss tool. We spoke with five of them about their experiences.

### Jennifer Tanui TOPS AR 0402 Conway

**Choosing surgery:** Jennifer had struggled with her weight her entire life and reached an all-time high of 421 pounds before joining TOPS in 2008. She had gastric bypass in early 2010, and now weighs 175.

“My entire life, even as a child, I was really heavy. When I was 10, my Daddy passed away, and I vividly remember eating and eating and eating,” she says. “When I decided to have the surgery, I was at a point where I could hardly check the mailbox without having to rest. I had depression, I was on high blood pressure medication, and I had a really low quality of life.”

**Life after surgery:** Jennifer had to jump through many hoops to get her insurance to help cover the cost of surgery, but once she did, she committed to change. “It’s an expensive surgery, and I was really afraid that the weight would come back if I didn’t embrace the opportunity to use this tool to change my lifestyle,” she says. She had no complications and was able to start exercising three weeks after surgery, doing water aerobics and walking. Then she started running, and recently completed her first half-marathon, a 13.1-mile race. “I couldn’t ask for a better life,” she says. “This is the best thing I’ve ever done.”

**Keys to success:** Sessions with a nutritionist that taught her about the importance of a healthy diet; goal setting; prayer. “I educated myself about what to eat, and set attainable goals. It’s amazing when I continue to reach a new one,” she says. “And I feel like God has given me a lot of strength.”

**Advice:** “This isn’t a quick-fix,” she says. “If you don’t change your mental perspective, it won’t do anything for you. You have to change your lifestyle. It’s a mental thing.”



ISTOCK/THINKSTOCK (TEXTURED BACKGROUND)

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEMBERS



## Bob Saal

### TOPS WI 1464 Rice Lake

**Choosing surgery:** Bob's heaviest weight was 457 pounds. Then he lost 113 pounds through exercise, a better diet and the support of TOPS. But then he had to go to the hospital for swelling in his leg. "I came within 20 minutes of death, and that's when I thought, 'Hey, Bob, time to wake up.' I thought weight-loss surgery would be an extra tool," he says. He had gastric bypass in 2012.

**Life after surgery:** While his surgery went well, two weeks later he was back in the hospital to treat another condition. However, in both instances, Bob was back to his regular routine—and workouts—within a couple of days. Before surgery, he was on 11 medications; today he requires none and weighs 191 pounds.

**Keys to success:** Changing the ways he eats—and thinks. "Anyone can diet—I did for many years. But whenever I got confident or hit a plateau, I'd have a big dinner and blow it. Now I know it's a life change—it's not OK to gorge yourself," he says. He continues to exercise regularly and participate in TOPS. "The support of TOPS and my family keeps me going," he says.

**Advice:** "If you decide to have surgery, listen to your surgeon's and your dietitian's advice," he says. "Care about yourself. Gastric bypass is a tool. How you use it makes weight loss happen."

## James Lucas

### TOPS OH 1155 Fairview Park

**Choosing surgery:** After James left TOPS, his weight ballooned to 538 pounds. "My biggest fear was that I wasn't going to live to see 50," he says. "I was gifted at dieting, just not at keeping it off. I decided that I needed to do something or I'd be dead. I always thought surgery was cheating, but it isn't."

**Life after surgery:** James was ill for several months post-surgery. "I was losing 18 pounds per week initially. My endocrine system collapsed and threw off my brain chemistry, and I had severe depression and panic attacks," he says. He wasn't able to return to work right away and says the first six months post-surgery were rough. He still experiences dumping syndrome, which occurs when undigested food is transported too quickly into your small intestine; it causes cramps, nausea and diarrhea.

**Keys to success:** Exercise and a new outlook. "The surgery really got me to look at food as something I needed to live—I didn't need to live for it," he says. He is very active today—biking, jogging, swimming and weightlifting—and eats three or four small meals a day. He weighs about 175 pounds.

**Advice:** Make sure you're committed to changing your lifestyle *before* you have surgery. "Ask whether you are ready to change," he says. "Too many people are not, and they do the surgery and gain the weight back."



I was gifted at dieting, just not at keeping it off. I needed to do something or I'd be dead.



## Mernita Cline

TOPS CO 0254 Colorado Springs

**Choosing surgery:** “I’d fought weight all my life—gone up and down, and up and down. I’d tried everything under the sun,” Mernita says. “I got up over 300 pounds and had bad knees, and I couldn’t walk and couldn’t exercise. Surgery was a last resort. In desperation, I decided to have it done.”

**Life after surgery:** Mernita was fine immediately after surgery, but two days later she started vomiting and was readmitted to the hospital. Her internal incision had come apart. She required a second, eight-hour surgery to repair it and was put in a drug-induced coma for three weeks. A month later, she was finally home and started losing weight, reaching about 220 after a year. She started walking again but needed double knee replacement surgery. Even so, she’s been able to stay active and maintain her KOPS goal weight of 172.

**Keys to success:** Changing her diet and becoming a regular exerciser. “I started with baby food and pureed foods, and only ate what I was supposed to,” she says. “I stick to 1,600 calories to maintain my weight.” Even after being diagnosed with severe rheumatoid arthritis and having knee replacements and a hernia repair a year after surgery, she’s been able to swim and do water exercise at the YMCA.

**Advice:** “It’s not a miracle cure,” she says. “Post-surgery, your stomach does stretch out, and it’s back to calorie counting and exercise. But it’s a good tool for someone who’s tried it all.”



She required a second surgery and was put in a drug-induced coma.



## Donna Wilfong-Sperry

TOPS NY 0142 Jamestown

**Choosing surgery:** Donna has been a member of TOPS since 1986. Her highest weight was 390. “I had bad knees and arthritis from years of being overweight. I was living on pain medicine, which had its own side effects,” she says. “I wasn’t getting around, and I was in my 40s!”

**Life after surgery:** Donna had gastric bypass in 2006, and had no complications post-surgery, except for having a hernia repaired a year afterward. “I lost 100 pounds the first year. Once I lost the first 50 pounds, my knee pain disappeared,” she says. “Today I live pain-free.”

**Keys to success:** Regular exercise—she walks at least three times a week both on a treadmill and outside—and a positive attitude. Her weight is about 250 pounds now, and has been as low as 227. While she may not be at her goal weight, the surgery has changed her life. “I feel like a new person,” she says. “I feel extremely young. And I’m much more active.”

**Advice:** “I would encourage anyone to look into surgery. I still have to do everything that everyone else has to do, but this was a great jump-start,” she says. “Maintenance is always going to be an issue, but I don’t get discouraged and drop out. I continue to be positive and go to TOPS.” ■