

FROM OBESE TO FIGHTING

How a beloved son reclaimed his life from despair FIT



It's every parent's nightmare – watching their child becoming a lonely recluse, existing on fast food and computer games. After Brenda Parker's marriage fell apart, she moved from Auckland to Australia with her young son, Robert, to be with her new partner – to a country where they knew no-one.

Over the next 10 years, she watched helplessly as her unhappy son retreated into a virtual world of computer gaming where he played the hero, while in the real world, he sank into obesity and despair.

They were dark days, when Robert would spend every waking hour with the blinds drawn, lost in computer games. Online, he was a legend. His game of choice was World of Warcraft where gamers choose an avatar (alter ego) to fight monsters and complete a quest.

By the time Robert left school a year early, he was a recluse; gaming from 6am to midnight, his weight crept to 200kg.

"I was worried about him the whole time, so I would race home just to see him and make dinner," says Brenda (57).

"You are locked into this cycle. I felt I was constantly racing from one point to the other. To sum this up for myself it would be horrendous guilt," she says.

"I was suicidal quite a few times and Robert stopped me. I'd already caused enough damage in his life."

Although Robert had started putting on weight at the age of eight, it wasn't until he and Brenda moved to Australia that the spiral deepened. By the age of 11, he had hit 100kg and his weight became the barometer by which his misery could be measured.

He copped a hammering at school for his Kiwi accent and his comfort soon became McDonald's, KFC and pizza.

He would wear a blazer to school in the middle of summer, hoping it would cover his bulk, when it did no more than highlight his unhappiness. Often, he'd simply stay at home.

Once, he took a whole week off school and wrote farewell letters to everyone,

then set off from his home with no direction in mind. He didn't get very far until his mother, racing from work, picked him up and took him home. Brenda still has those letters, neither able to read them again nor throw them out.

"I used to get very depressed about it but I was more afraid that I would lose him, that he would die," Brenda says.

Then, three years ago, Robert cancelled his online avatar and, at his father's suggestion, agreed to invite a personal trainer into his home. He began his long road to recovery.

When the trainer first saw him she was shocked. She had never met anyone so big and saw a depressed, lonely and troubled person. Robert's fitness was so poor that the most they could achieve in those early sessions was to have him stand up from the couch and sit down, followed by a little light boxing.

It was a long and difficult road, but he persevered and Brenda supported him every step of the way.

"Telling people about my progress and having others comment on how good I look is just awesome," says Robert (22).

Three years after that first session, he has shed exactly 100kg and weighs 95kg, the weight he was when he was 10 years old.

Just before Christmas, Robert had surgery to remove 5kg of excess skin that contained the fat that is now gone. He now laughs a lot and tells jokes. It's the quirky personality that previously only Brenda witnessed.

"I knew he was special underneath everything and we just needed to find a way to bring it out. That's why we never gave up and tried everything possible until we found something that resonated," she says.

"My life is totally different now," explains Robert. "Having the confidence to go out and take on the world is the best. I now deal with every aspect of my life with positivity."

PHOTOS: DAVID TEASE

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