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## Closer to freedom

*Area woman has lost more than 275 pounds*

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CHILLICOTHE - The obstacles in Jessica Drake's life piled up faster than she could deal with them.

Her depression led to weight gain. Her weight gain led to health problems.

First it was Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, which led to a hormone imbalance. Then she found out she was an insulin-resistant Type 2 diabetic.

Both illnesses not only worked against Drake's hopes of losing weight, they quickly made it worse.

Drake's weight ballooned to 700 pounds. Because of her disability, Drake could no longer work. Meanwhile, her husband of 14 years, Jack, lost his job.

At a time when the 49-year-old Fayette County resias she could get to help her work through her struggles, she found it hard to make friends.

Her weight kept Drake from getting out very often, and when she did, Drake said she was subject to ridicule from people she encountered because of her size.

"I tried to get the weight off, but I couldn't get it done," Drake remembered. "I went into a deep depression. People make fun of you."

Still, Drake found ways to stay motivated.

"I had a granddaughter (who) was going to be born," she said. "I knew if I didn't do something, I'd never see her be born. The way things were going I would have died."



**Fayette County resident Jessica Drake is seen here before her surgery to have 50 pounds of excess skin removed from her body. At one time, Drake weighed 700 pounds. At the time of this photo, Drake had lost 225 pounds. She is currently recovering from her surgery at a facility in Chillicothe.**

Through small steps - eating salads, avoiding fast food, drinking Slim Fast - Drake fought her way down from 700 pounds to 475.

But she wasn't done.

The weight loss caused Drake to develop an apron of excess skin that made it difficult for her to live a normal life.

If Drake's progress was to continue, she needed to have surgery to remove the excess flesh. Finding the courage to have the surgery, however, was a difficult task.

Drake still had few friends she could confide in about her problems. Then, at random, she found an online gaming site called Winster.com.

At first, the site was a simple way to enjoy her downtime at home. Quickly, though, it became something more.

"I started with Winster in July. I was suffering from depression and health problems. I thought this was something I could do and meet people who wouldn't judge me from what I looked like," she said. "I ended up meeting a lot of neat people on the site."

Knowing each other mostly by screen names, the gaming community Drake became a part of suddenly became a tight-knit group of friends.

"We could talk about everything and anything," Drake said. "Or just nothing at all."

Eventually, Drake was able to tell her new friends about the problems she had been experiencing.

"It was a way I could talk to people about my upcoming surgery and depression," she said. "And I found that that I wasn't alone. Other people have problems, too."

As her surgery approached, Drake found it more and more difficult to sleep, so she spent more time online. One friend in particular, who goes by the screen name Rev444 - a Virginia woman who is a reverend - became particularly helpful to Drake.

"The last couple of weeks before the surgery I was up late night," she said. "I told her, 'Rev, I'm scared.' She told me, 'God's with you.'"

As her friend prayed for her, the other gamers who were online at the time suddenly stopped playing.

When the prayer was done, Drake said that one-by-one, they all chimed in.

"It said 'Amen' across the board," Drake said. "Rev helped me deal with my problems."  
On Oct. 13, Drake and her husband made the trip to Mt. Carmel East Hospital in Columbus so that she could have the surgery she needed.

In the procedure, doctors removed 50 pounds of skin from Drake's midsection.

"I have no belly button now," Drake said with a smile. "I am truly a daughter of God."

While it seemed as if the worst was over, that was hardly the case.

Because of the amount of pain she was in after the surgery, Drake was on a large amount of painkillers. During the recovery process, the medication became too much for her body to handle and she slipped into respiratory failure.

But Drake survived, and again began to recover.

On Oct. 20, she was well enough to return home. But again, her ordeal was far from done.

"I went home for five days," she said. "I was discharged on the 20th of October. Then on the 25th I saw my surgeon and was told that everything was fine. Then, on the 26th, my wound opened up and I regressed."

Drake said that if not for her husband being at her side, she very easily could have died that night from the infection - if not a week earlier from the medication overdose.

Three days later she was back in surgery having a device called a Wound Vac attached to her midsection to help rid her of the infection.

Since then, she has been recovering at the Chillicothe Nursing and Rehab Center in Ross County - away from her husband (who cannot afford to make the drive as often as he'd like), and since there is no WiFi signal available, away from her online friends as well.

"I figure I'll be here at least 4 to 6 weeks," Drake said. "I've already had three breakdowns and I've only been here a week. (Jack) is totally lost. We call each other ... I would hate to see the minute we've used."

Drake has now lost 275 pounds. She said there are at least 200 more to go before she is content.

"My motivation is being able to be a real person again," she said. "Walk my dogs. Mow the grass. Those are the things I miss the most. It's been two years. And the last year has been the hardest."

Because of her weight and her surgeries, Drake said she has become weak. At the moment she

cannot walk, but she said she hopes that changes very soon due to the therapy she is receiving.

"There are a lot of firsts I have to go through again," she said. "Walking. Buying clothes at a real store."

And she's looking forward to getting back home. Back to her husband. Back to her five grandchildren - ages 13 years to eight months. Back to her friends on Winster.

"Then I'll go back to freedom," Drake said.

Her friends are anxiously waiting on her return.

Michelle Kaplan is a co-founder of the California-based Web site.

"(Jessica's) story is truly inspiring and I am so glad Winster.com was able to provide her with the support and encouragement she needed to move forward in her personal journey," Kaplan said via e-mail. "When we started Winster, we wanted to create a site that would provide a positive social experience for our players, but we really did not anticipate how strongly people would bond."