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WEDNESDAY, MAY 9, 2007

SHAPE

FROM E1

Routine exam scared doctor into shape

In October 2005, the Beachwood woman put on a bikini for the first time in her life and walked out in front of a 1,000 people at a bodybuilding competition at Lakewood Civic Auditorium.

"I almost ran off stage before I went on," she said. "I felt really sick to my stomach."

But she walked on. Pride stilled her nerves just enough.

She was 54, a size 4, and her body was ripped.

Freeman grew up in River Rouge, Mich., where her father was a millwright at a steel plant and her mother was a teacher.

As a teen, she was active in tennis and the marching band, but put on weight during her years at Michigan State.

"All we did was eat and study, study and eat," she said.

She married at 32, and soon she had two daughters. During her second pregnancy, Freeman weighed 190 pounds and developed gestational diabetes.

Over the years, Freeman tried to lose weight, but it always came back. Weight Watchers, Optifast... it was the diet-plan plot of so many women's lives.

Freeman's weight — 215 pounds at its highest — put her in the company of millions of Americans. As an obstetrician and gynecologist at two MetroHealth clinics in Cleveland, she had seen hundreds of women who were dangerously heavy. Scales at the clinics measure up to 450 pounds to accommodate America's obesity boom.

Her husband, Jon, a microwave engineer at NASA, said his wife's new attention to fitness had another major factor: Their daughters had left for college.

"She had time to think about something else," he said. "She wanted to do something — she was already having a harder time breathing when she went up the stairs."

So, Deborah Freeman began taking care of herself.

She told her work colleagues about her weight-loss plans. She pasted pictures of her smiling face on top of Glamour magazine photos of fit models.

Freeman began eating five or six small meals a day — more vegetables, lean protein, complex carbs. She prepared much of her



Jon and Deborah Freeman are dressed up for a recent night out. After more than two decades of marriage, Jon witnessed the mental and physical discipline his wife drew upon to transform her body and health.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DEBORAH FREEMAN

food on Sunday nights, and packed her meals so she was never without a healthy snack. She switched from a treadmill to a more rigorous routine on the elliptical. She hired a trainer to show her how to do a light weight routine.

She went from 215 to 190 pounds, but then plateaued.

She then hired Dave Liberman, an expert weight trainer who sponsors natural (drug-free) bodybuilding competitions. He put together a more intense weightlifting program for her. Rapidly, she began to see a lot of muscle definition.

Within a few months, she was wearing clothes in single-digit sizes. She'd greet a patient who hadn't seen her for a year, and the puzzled woman would say, "Where's Dr. Freeman?"

Her fellow members at the Titan's Gym in Mentor, open 24 hours, asked if she had considered entering bodybuilding-figure competitions. She found the idea intriguing.

During her first competition on that Lakewood stage, she placed 11th out of 11 women in the 50-and-over category.

The competitive bug had bitten her. Now she not only had a workout she loved, she'd also set goals for the next contest.

That is what renews her motivation to continue her healthy diet. She does allow herself a "cheat" meal — perhaps pizza — once a week, if she's not working toward a competition.

During the past two years, Freeman has placed higher and higher in every contest. And, each time, she'd also write large checks to the American Cancer Society, in honor of several family members who died of breast cancer within three months of one another in 1997.

"It reminds me and others that this is not just about how a body looks, but about a healthy lifestyle," said Freeman.

At the J. Glen Smith Health Center adjacent to Glenville High School, in Cleveland, Freeman inspires her colleagues and patients.

"She showed us all that it really can be done," said co-worker Jennifer Jones, a nurse at the clinic, who now works out at a gym and with a trainer, too.

In 2006, Freeman buried two childhood friends. One died during bariatric surgery; the other from congestive heart failure. Both were obese, and exactly her age.

Liberman, Freeman's trainer, said her "heart and desire" set her apart from people who think just working with a trainer will improve their body.

"Debbie gets that she has to do the work."

True, he said, Freeman is fortunate in that her body fairly easily builds muscle.

"But she never would have known that, because her muscles were buried under layers of fat most of her life," he said.

Who knows how many other women might have physical gifts, as yet undiscovered?

Ten days ago, Freeman entered her sixth figure competition, a regional one in Weirton, W.Va.

She won first place.

But something even better happened, she said. A figure competitor in her 20s came up to Freeman.

"You are my inspiration," she told her. "I have your picture on my refrigerator."

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