

A Transformation: Little by Little Oklahoma's Amy Downs Is A New Woman

by Mark Bravo

To chronicle the last two decades of Amy Downs' life is to epitomize the definition of defying the odds. The unlikelihood of her journey to wellness, becoming a quality cyclist, running a marathon - even being alive, makes her plight one unlike any you've come across. What finally moves someone to alter their life course so drastically that the results dramatically impact those they touch, in essence raising the calibration of the world around them?

Amy Downs likes to say, "It's not what happens to you that counts - it's what you do with it!" Quotes are a pivotal part of Downs' life. They are part of the formula that keeps Downs aspiring toward her goals. Keep the aforementioned quote foremost in your mind, because the timeline of events unfolding offered Downs, time and time again, roads that might have taken her down very different paths.

The date is April 19, 1995. Downs is at work speaking to an office mate literally inches away. In an instant, the young lady disappears, and when Downs gathers her senses, she too is in a different place. She doesn't know where, only that she can't move. The rubble of the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing is where she landed. Downs can literally touch, but not see a rescue worker, but when threats of another bomb forces all the rescuers to depart the perimeter, though he promises to return, her hopefulness turns to despair.

At 350 pounds, she ponders what was left undone in her life. Those thoughts are focusing in great part on not having taken control of her health.

After 6½ hours, with the same rescue worker present, Downs emerges. Something was different though. "Buried for over 6 hours I had lots of time to think about regrets I had. I vowed to live my life differently and with purpose if I made it out alive. It took several years to get through the trauma and devastation but as I emerged from it I kept true to that promise. First, focusing on my spiritual life, next going back to school to get my degree, then my masters." All the while, the unfulfillment brought on by her obesity remains paramount in her mind.

January 2008. "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do." Eleanor Roosevelt



AMY BEFORE

Mayor Mick Cornett's initiative **ThisCityIsGoingOnADiet.com** gets Downs' attention. Twice more she begins a diet to deal with the weight she gained in her early 20's, and twice more her attempts are unsuccessful.

"That saying about the definition of insanity being repeating the same action and expecting different results kept entering my mind, and I knew I had to change something drastically. I talked to doctors about bariatric surgery, and my two surgeons explained very honestly all the risks involved, and stressed that bariatric surgery was only a tool and in order to be successful you had to change your lifestyle, eating healthy and be active."

Surgery was scheduled for July, 2008, and in short order Downs lost 100 pounds, but then the progress stopped. What she feared down-deep she knew she had to face: it was time to start exercising.

"I realized that it was time to exercise. In January 2009, I entered the gym for the first time. I remember seeing all those

mirrors and wondering why in the world they felt they had to put that many mirrors up. I didn't want to look at myself even though I had lost a significant amount of weight. I still had so much more to go. I lasted 5 minutes on the elliptical and then had to just walk on the treadmill."

By April, 2009, the gym had become integral in Downs' life, so when her sister took her for a bike ride around Lake Hefner, a chain of events began that altered the course of her life: "I rode all the way around Lake Hefner! I felt like Lance Armstrong. I remember being so shocked at all the people out on the trail walking, jogging, roller blading, riding bikes, etc. Where did this secret society come from? I thought everyone

sat around on the couch eating Cheetos™ and watching biggest loser. She encouraged me to participate in a community bike ride called the Red Bud Classic. I did the 10 mile ride and they gave me a medal and pancakes at the end. I was hooked."

Late April, 2009: "You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore." - unknown

Downs passes out medals at the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon, as is the race custom for survivors of the Murrah Building bombing. She makes a rash statement that she will run in honor of her friends who were killed that day in 1995. An employee at the time of Federal Employees Credit Union, 18 of her 33 co-workers perished. She's never run before, but the momentum built while transforming her body and life, somehow instills a quiet confidence that she can do anything she puts before herself as a goal.

August, 2011: "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you've imagined" Thoreau

"Running has never been on my radar...it's not anything I ever thought I could do. The cycling continues, but running is a different animal. I keep going back to the confidence built from the fitness progress I've made, and believe that at some point I'll be a runner."

Downs hires a running coach and her first effort produces roughly a 15-minute mile. It's all she can do, and it's enough to keep her coming back for more. By the end of 2011, with her first 5K run under her belt, her aspirations and fitness (with another 20 pounds shed) ramp up again. Now, with her sights set on the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon. Everywhere Downs goes, her story of survival, transformation and rebirth is discovered, and she's happy to take time to speak to anyone who asks.

The weekend of the Little Rock half marathon in early March 2012, she catches the attention of everyone - from a cancer patient seeking hope, to Runner's World magazine's Bart Yasso. The half marathon becomes one of the seminal moments in Downs' trajectory as an athlete. Two weeks before the OKC Memorial Marathon, with training in the books, she takes to the bike into that same Red Bud Classic event that started it all - this time as a fit, confident athlete.

Another roadblock, and it could've been much, much worse. During the 50-mile ride, a tandem bike collides with Downs, flattening her helmet and knocking her out. An ambulance ride, predominant road rash and a concussion later, she texts her coach (an act she must take my word for...she has no recollection) and asks if she can still run the marathon. I assure her because I'm certain that if the doctor clears her to start, she'll run her first marathon.

"At some point I learned it's not all about the clock. It's not even all about losing 200 pounds. Those are components that keep you aspiring, keep you hungry...what really makes it worth it, though, is that you can show you're in charge of your own life, and nothing or no one else."

Downs takes the starting line Sunday, April 29, 2012, embarking upon unfamiliar territory. This has become a recurring theme in her life, and is the template for many speeches she gives for the Oklahoma City National Memorial. The first half of the race goes as hoped, with Amy sticking to

her plan and methodically logging mile after mile. Then at the 12-mile point, a knee that grew troublesome after the bike accident becomes angry, and Downs all at once finds herself in a "fight or flight" war of attrition that persists the remainder of the race.

Down's is greeted at the home stretch by a recent friend of mutual admiration, Camille Herron, who having set the women's course mark in the marathon that day has stayed on to welcome Downs to her first marathon finish line. Her coach

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photo by
Anthony Meyer

AMY NOW

has the pleasure of announcing her through the finish line. Although Downs has felt the disappointment of not having run the race as fast as she hoped, the realization that her 6 ½ hour finish is exactly the amount of time she had been buried in the Murrah Building bombing feels like poetic justice. She's reminded that her ultimate goal has been reached. Downs again finished what she started!



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2013....and beyond. "We can only be said to be truly alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures."
Thornton Wilder

As Amy's running coach these last two years, the physical accomplishments and transformation I've witnessed, while indeed most noteworthy, are not what I count as her greatest accomplishments. What sticks to you with Amy is that you feel the 200 pounds lost, marathon run, and the many long-distance cycling events are simply her "vehicle" for helping others discover there is a path beyond whatever it is that might be holding them back in life.

Amy plans to include four 100-mile cycling events. One of these was just completed as part of her honeymoon. Downs recently married another cyclist, Terry Head on July 6 2013. This all leads to September 2014 when I hear we're aspiring to the Half Ironman distance at the Redman Triathlon.

She tells me I'll be coaching her, but often in her presence I wonder who truly is the coach, and who the pupil.



Mark Bravo is an author, public speaker, freelance writer and running coach in Oklahoma City. His book: "MOMENTUM: 77 Observations Toward A Life Well-Lived" can be found at runbravo.com.

Amy's four paths to 'never giving up':

Positive Attitude. Simple. You have to have one or you won't make it. I had to see the best in these situations or I would have given up particularly the crash before the marathon.

Write the Goals Down. I take stock of what I want frequently and write it down where I can see it and reference back to it.

Find others to hold you accountable and support you. It is always easier to accomplish a goal with others. The buddy system works. Tell others about your goals so they will help hold you accountable.

Never give up. When you have an addiction (such as overeating or whatever) you do whatever it takes to free yourself. Also, understand the battle is there for the rest of your life and when you fall - you get back up no matter how many times you fall. You always get back up because you can never give up. As long as you never give up, you are succeeding.



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