

'YOU'RE AN INSPIRATION, BENJI!'



Benji Willis has kept his 100-pound weight loss off for a year now, fueled by encouragement from (clockwise from bottom left) his family, his church youth group, his Ripley High School teachers, and the Ripley Volunteer Fire Department.

KATE LONG
Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

BENJI AT 270 POUNDS:



With town's support, Ripley teen runs off 100 pounds

A year later, he's keeping it off

By Kate Long
Staff writer

RIPLEY — Sixteen-year-old Benji Willis got up at 5:55 a.m., ate a breakfast bar, then unfolded a huge treadmill in the middle of the small living room. He switched on the Outdoor Channel and started running.

He ran three miles while he watched a guy in India catch giant snakes. "I focus on the TV and don't think about running," he said. "I let my body do its thing."

"This is what I do every day," he said.

Benji lost 102 pounds in six months that way. He burnt up his first treadmill. "It started smoking when I turned it on one day. We had to get another one."

Just as important, since April 2011, he has kept it off. He is fit. He weighs about 170 now.

"People always ask, 'How do you get yourself to do it?' Well, I just got myself into a habit of it. It just comes natural now. I get out of bed, get on the treadmill and run."

Last year, he dropped from 270 pounds to 168. This year, he kept it off. "I want to stay in shape, so when I got down to the weight I wanted to be, I didn't quit running," he said. "I just ate more, and kept it right around 170."

He usually runs at about 6 mph for 30 to 40 minutes. He dials the speed up higher in the last couple of minutes.

He's run more than 2,000 miles in his living room, he figures.

Six in 10 Americans gain back the weight they lose. Benji's not one of them. "This is lifestyle change. I'm staying in shape," he said.

By the time his mom and dad get up, most days, the treadmill's back against the wall, and Benji's getting ready for another day at Ripley High School. "After I get home, I'll run another three to five miles," he said. "I run between six and 10 miles a day."

Why is this guy running?

One night in 2010, when Benji was 15, he and his dad went raccoon hunting with some men from their church. "They were all marching through the woods, up and down hills with no problem," he said. "They were 20, 40 years older than me, but I was falling way behind, getting tired. It was embarrassing. I was huffing and puffing, trying to carry all my weight uphill."

He weighed 270 pounds then. Up ahead, the dog treed a coon. "I could hear them going up the hill, but I was so out of breath, I couldn't keep up. I felt pathetic. Right there, I knew I had to do something."

"I've wanted to be a firefighter all my life, and it hit me that I'd never be able to fight fires if I



"When I'm on my treadmill running, all is right with the world. My mind is clear and I have nothing whatsoever to worry about except how many miles I'm going."

BENJI WILLIS

couldn't even climb a hill," he said. When he was a toddler, his Charleston firefighter dad, James Willis, took him to the station and let him play around the fire engine.

After the hunt, Benji thought every day about losing weight. "But I figured, what's the use? My family's obese, so I'm going to be too." "I was so sick of people calling me fat. They'd do it jokingly, not to be mean, but still, I was tired of being made fun of and feeling lousy about myself."

He thought he was stuck with it for the rest of his life. He started watching "The Biggest Loser" on TV. "No matter what you might think of that show, it inspired me. I saw all these big people losing weight. They enjoy food, and if they eat too much, they exercise it off."

He quit drinking pop and started walking the dog. To his surprise, he dropped about 10 pounds. He start-

SEE BENJI, 4C

facebook AS WEIGHT LOSS TOOL

Benji Willis announced on Facebook that he was going to lose 100 pounds. Each week, he posted his weight loss, and dozens of people cheered him on. When he posted that the Gazette would interview him, 120 people "liked" his message, and he got 37 comments, including:



Emma Wilkinson

You are a great example of what one can do if we set our minds to it.

Like | Comment



Debbie Click

You have worked so hard! I truly admire your determination!

Like | Comment



Melissa George

You deserve a reward for all the self motivation you have.

Like | Comment



Laura Sullivan

i think you are amazing..

Like | Comment



Brenna Rawlings Garber

IT WAS SUCH A JOY TO FOLLOW YOUR DAILY SUCCESSES AND CHEER YOU ON...IT INSPIRED ME AND I KNOW YOUR STORY WILL INSPIRE OTHERS TOO.

Like | Comment



Abbey Sullivan

You're the best Benji!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Like | Comment



April Hager

You will be an inspiration to many!

Like | Comment

PARENTS: Want to motivate your kids to lose weight?

- Most young people aren't motivated by fear of diabetes or heart disease. That's not real to them. They need goals that mean something to them now. A child may want to play sports or fit into a smaller size clothes, for instance.

- Talk with your child to explore what might happen if he or she lost weight. What would they hope could happen? What could they do that they can't do now?

- If Jimmy wants to eat six pieces of pizza, help him remember his goal. ("You could do that, but would it help you get on the soccer team?")

- Together with your child, decide on small, short-term, achievable goals, with rewards that aren't food, e.g. "When you can run two blocks, you can go to the movies with your friend."

- Make sure children get regular praise for small successes.

- Set a good example. Let them see you taking care of your own health, exercising and eating healthy food.

- Organize family outings around physical activity.

- Limit screen time (computer, video games, etc.) to two hours a day.

SOURCE: W.Va. pediatricians and dietitians

BENJI

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ed to think, “Maybe I can do this.”

What kept Benji going?

Benji had tried to lose weight before. “It was different this time because I was thinking about the fire department,” he said. “It wasn’t just losing weight. I knew I couldn’t be a good firefighter if I wasn’t fit.”

“Motivation is everything,” said Dr. Jamie Jeffrey, director of Healthy Kids, Charleston Area Medical Center’s child weight loss program. There’s internal motivation and external motivation, she said.

A stranger watching Benji run on his treadmill might think he did it all alone, but “our church, the guys at the volunteer fire department, his teachers and friends at school, everybody’s been cheering Benji on, once it became clear that he was serious,” his mom said. He could easily have gotten discouraged and quit if he hadn’t had such a strong cheerleading squad.

His aunt and uncle lent him an exercise bike to get him started. “I lost maybe 25 pounds riding it maybe 15 to 20 miles a day for about a month. Then I got the treadmill.”

He told his gym teachers what he was doing. “Every day, they’d ask me how far I ran the night before. That really helped, especially at first. If I didn’t feel like running one night, I’d think, ‘They’re going to ask me tomorrow, so I better run.’”

The teachers didn’t realize they were doing something important. “We were just so amazed by his determination,” said teacher Tess Gump.

West Virginia high school students are required to take only one semester of physical education in four years. Luckily, that was Benji’s semester.

“Once I lost about 30 pounds, other people started to notice,” Benji said. “People at church and school started saying I looked better. That helped so much, just people encouraging me. Those little comments kept me going.”

At the same time, he was finding he loves to run. “Now I



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“At home, we bake stuff now instead of frying it, and I’m in control of how much I eat,” Benji Willis said. “If I gain a few pounds around holidays, I know what I need to do to take it back off. Run more, eat less.”

feel weird if I don’t run,” he said.

“As I lost weight, I became more popular at school. People started congratulating me in the halls and coming up and asking me how I did it, so we’d talk and it would go from there, then we’d be friends. It seems like people are more willing to talk with me without the weight.”

His youth group at Ripley Baptist Temple, young people he’s known all his life, “were with me all the way,” he said. “They kept encouraging me, saying ‘Way to go!’”

Facebook helped. While he was losing the hundred pounds, he’d post how many pounds he’d lost each week. “I’d get 20 or 30 comments back,” he said. “I couldn’t wait to read them. They kept me going.”

The right motivation

Benji weighed only three pounds when he was born. Low birth-weight babies are at high risk for overweight, diabetes and hypertension.

He was skinny “or normal weight” till about fourth grade, he said, then he started packing on pounds. “I ate a lot of junk food, and I spent most of my free time sitting around playing video games. I wasn’t out there riding bikes or running or anything like that.”

But diabetes and hypertension “weren’t anything I thought about,” he said. “I know I lowered my diabetes risk when I lost weight, and that’s good,” he said, “but that’s not why I did it. I was tired of being fat, and I want to be a good firefighter, those two reasons.”

“People who want to help young people lose weight need to pay attention to that,” Dr. Jeffrey said. “It’s not enough to tell them they might get diabetes. They need — anyone needs — an immediate reason that means something to them.”

The day Benji turned 16, 100 pounds lighter, he signed on as a trainee at the Ripley Volunteer Fire Department. His dad, with 27

years experience in Charleston, joined the VFD with him. Now Benji keeps his VFD radio with him and goes to the firehouse several nights a week, sometimes with his dad, sometimes not.

When he posts on Facebook, he often tells what happened at the fire station that day. Sometimes he cleaned the engines or the firehouse. Other days, he’s learning to tie knots or handle a high-pressure hose or rescue somebody trapped in high water. Sometimes he just sits around with the guys and talks.

“We’re always waiting to get called out for runs.” He can help with medical emergencies, people who get lost, or water rescues. He can’t go into burning buildings until he’s 18, “but I can help in other ways.”

His parents have supported him right down the line. “Obviously, I’m not crazy about having the treadmill taking up so much of the living room,” said his mom, Jane, “but our house is too small to put it anywhere else, and we know how important it is to him. We’re here to support him any way we can.

“We don’t fry anything anymore,” she said. “It’s all baked. He insists on it. We have hamburgers, but we bake them. We bake our chicken. And it all tastes good.”

Benji learned about nutrition on “The Biggest Loser,” he said. “They should teach it in health class at school too, but they don’t,” he said. “They mainly talk about alcohol and drugs. Half the teachers don’t eat healthy themselves, so maybe they don’t like to talk about nutrition.”

He is on a low-key campaign to get his parents more fit. He

asks them to go power-walking with him in the evening. “I’m trying to get them onto a walking schedule,” he said. Sometimes they go with him.

Occasionally, he thinks back to the night he went coon hunting in the dark. “It’s funny, because now I’m the first person the fire department puts on the ground if somebody’s lost in the woods at night, because I can get around so easily.”

Not long ago, he helped find one of his classmates who got lost in the woods. “Life is very different for me now,” he said. “My future looks good.” As he wrote on Facebook, “I’m going to have a fun life.”

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To send Benji a message, comment on this story online at wvgazette.com.

Monday: A 16-year-old learns to live with a diabetes diagnosis

Tuesday: A 9-year-old loses weight, then gains it back. What should she do?