

'Keep going! Don't give up!'

Physical activity, good nutrition can overcome early-life trauma

By **Kate Long**
Staff writer

IN one of Eric Duesenberry's first memories, people in white coats are bursting through the door. Something is beeping. He can't breathe. People are grabbing him. Someone is giving him a shot.

He is 3 years old, in a mist tent, having a severe asthma attack.



THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

He was in the hospital 20 times before he was 4, his mother said. As a toddler, he had allergies so severe, he required daily shots. His early life was filled with terrifying events. "I'd wake up in an ambulance, scared to death," he remembered.

As a side effect of his medicine, he was constantly hungry. "The doctors told us to expect that," said his father, Ernie Duesenberry.

"But I won't blame the medicine or my early experiences entirely," said Eric, 25. "Food also became a big comfort to me."

His mother, Sharon Duesenberry, said, "We were young parents. He was our only child, so when he was little and crying at night, we felt so bad for him, we'd get him whatever would comfort him, and sometimes that was a pizza."

Eric had what researchers call "adverse childhood experiences" that break a child's trust that they are safe in the adult world. Research shows that whatever the adverse experience, such children are more likely to have problems, including obesity and difficulty learning.

It does not mean they will, but statistically the likelihood is great. Eric is proving it doesn't have to stay that way.

He grew fast. By the time he was in third grade, "they had to bring a desk down from the sixth grade for me." The teasing was "pretty constant," he said. "My teachers tried to watch out for me."



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail

Eric Duesenberry jumped up and cheered when Health Right nurse practitioner Michele Selanik said his blood sugar and cholesterol had dropped again. "I want to live to be 90," the Cross Lanes man said. "I'm starting to think maybe I have a shot."



After a childhood defined by constant illness, by seventh grade, Eric weighed 250 pounds. By the time he was a high school senior, his weight had ballooned to more than 400 pounds. "They couldn't weigh me on a standard scale anymore," he says.

"Something clicked for me, and I realized that if anything was going to be different for me, it had to be me that made it different."

ERIC DUSENBERRY

By seventh grade he weighed 250 pounds. By the time he was a senior, "they couldn't weigh me on a standard scale anymore." He had topped 400 pounds.

He could give answers orally but had trouble writing things down — a learning disability. His teachers said he tested high on subjects such as history and science. To escape, he read constantly. "I won the summer li-

brary prize three years running for the kid who read the most books."

By his senior year, he no longer took allergy shots and cortisone, "but I kept telling myself the weight would drop off. I was in denial."

He hit his turning point a few months before he graduated. One day, his gym teacher got

SEE **ERIC, 5F**



SMELL THE COFFEE

KARIN FULLER

A brave new world

IAM not a fearful person, but neither am I brave. I am tough. I'll give myself that. Maybe even a little bit hardened. But brave? Not so much.

The changes in my life that began last summer were unexpected, but were they entirely unwanted? Hadn't I been sort of longing for a bit of adventure?

No. Actually, I hadn't. I was fairly content with my ordinary life, my predictable routine. I can't say I was happy, but I was trying my damndest to bloom where I'd been planted. I even had the next 40 or so years pretty much plotted out. Was comfortably familiar with the road I was on.

But somehow, I ended up on a completely different patch of ground. Some of the landmarks stayed the same, but the horizon looks nothing like it did before.

By forcing myself outside of my comfort zone, I not only have a checkmark on my list of fears to overcome, but I also have a new interest.

Once upon a time, the Gazette's Doug Imbrogno suggested I try stepping out of my comfort zone every once in a while. He encouraged me to deliberately take on new experiences because those experiences would expand my little world, would give me more to write about than just my parenting and animal tales.

His advice seemed lightly given — a passing thought shared — yet it's something I've revisited many times since.

It isn't easy for a routine

ERIC

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called away for a phone call while students were doing pushups. Eric was on the floor, trying. "I couldn't do any more than two. When I tried to get up, I couldn't get up past my knees."

Nobody helped him. He started crawling toward the bleachers. Someone moved to give him a hand up, but "a guy said, 'No, let the egg crawl.'" Students began to snicker.

In that moment, he said, "It all just washed over me. I saw how enormous I was, how bloated. By the time I pulled myself up on the bleachers, terrible thoughts were going through my head."

That incident "could easily have had a tragic outcome if he had not had a strong support system at home," said John Linton, acting director of CAMC's Behavioral Medicine Department. "Shattering moments can move a person to change if there's good support, but they can also make the person much worse."

Eric told his mother and grandmother what happened. "My mom comforted me, and my grandma gave me a wake-up call," he said. She "is a nonsense West Virginia woman who tells it like it is. She said I had a choice to stay that big, or I could decide to change."

"If I stayed that way, she said, I'd die young. She said it just



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

"I kept some pants from high school so I'd remember where I started," Eric Duesenberry says.



After a cooking demonstration at Health Right by extension agent Robert Burton (inset), Duesenberry went home and cooked the same dish for his family. "If you cook, fresh food can cost less than junk food," he said.

like that — kind, but serious. It really sank in on me.

"It had never hit me before that I had a choice, that I really could choose. I thought that's just how my life was."

'Serious about changing?'

Eric graduated from Nitro High School in size-58 pants. He started going to the Cross Lanes YMCA. "Day after day, you'd see

me waddling on the treadmill. There's no other word for it. I was determined. The employees cheered me on."

By midsummer, his mother insisted he climb on the scales. "Imagine being happy about weighing 350 pounds! It was one of the happiest days of my life."

He started building retaining walls for his grandmother's stonework business. "At first, he

could only lift small rocks," his father recalls. "Now he lifts 94-pound bags of cement with no trouble."

Said Eric, "I made it down to 330, then was stuck for about a year. Most people hit a plateau."

In a financial crisis, the family had to drop their YMCA membership. His parents work nights, cleaning office buildings.

In late 2011, Eric and his

dad, a diabetic, started going to West Virginia Health Right. They looked at Eric's blood sugar. He tested positive for Type 2 diabetes.

During that first visit, nurse practitioner Michele Selanik asked him, 'Are you serious about changing?' and I said, 'You bet. For me, it's life and death,' Eric recalled.

"He impressed me from the

beginning with his gumption and determination," Selanik said. She got him into their diabetes education classes and Weight Watchers group so he could change his eating and grocery habits.

"I've made it down to 280," Eric said. "That still sounds heavy, but remember where I started. I've lost a whole person."

His Health Right records

"This is a life change, not a temporary change. That's what they tell us at Weight Watchers. Junk food is all around you, but you can still take control of your health and life. You can do what you need to do."

ERIC DUSENBERRY

show his blood sugar (A1C) in the normal range, down by a third.

His whole family revamped their eating habits. "No more ice cream and candy," said Sharon Duesenberry. "We don't want that stuff here to tempt us."

Eric lives with his parents near Cross Lanes. He's been reading up on nutrition. He says things like, "Do you know that they genetically modify wheat, and processed wheat is a big cause of obesity?"

"This is a life change, not a temporary change," he said. "They tell us that at Weight Watchers. Junk food is all around you, but you can still take control of your health and life."

"This is you, taking your life in your own hands, doing what you need to do. I'm learning how to use spices, steaming raw vegetables. I can make about six dishes with chicken. We only use breads Dr. Oz approves of. I bring labels from cereal boxes and stuff to Weight Watchers, and they explain it to me."

Early in November, Eric started a new job. "I've got my own office building to clean now," he said. He and his dad started back at the Y, working out several times a week.

He offers some advice. "When you realize that you are — I'm going to say it — fat, don't be discouraged. You'll be amazed what you can do, exercising, not eating junk food or processed food, cutting down on portion sizes."

"You may feel there's no hope. Keep going. You can't give up. That day in the gym, something clicked for me, and I realized that if anything was going to be different for me, it had to be me that made it different."

"I use that day as a springboard. When I have a setback, I remember it, and keep moving forward."

Sometimes he thinks about college or further training, he said. "But for now, it's enough to see that I actually can make myself better. Right now, I don't have complicated goals. My goal is to fit into normal pants. I'll think about the rest when it's time."

Reach Kate Long at katelong@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1798.