



Sister Karen Cavanagh, at an informational seminar, displays her pre-surgery clothing.

Transformed

Bariatric surgery literally saved this nun's life. Now she's helping others by sharing her experience. **BY LISA ARCELLA**

Sister Karen Cavanagh likes to joke that 12 years ago she was actually rounder than she was tall. Standing 4 feet 8 inches, she was 255 pounds. But while Sister Karen has managed to retain a sense of humor about it, the hardships imposed by that excess weight were no laughing matter. "I might as well have been 500 pounds," she says. "It was so much bulk to carry around."

She took nine Advils a day to cope with the aches and pains and was on two high blood pressure medications while battling diabetes.

She believed she was doomed to a life of yo-yo dieting, until she witnessed the success a friend had with bariatric surgery at Westchester Medical Center (WMC), the flagship of the Westchester Medical Center Health Network. Inspired by her friend, Sister Karen decided to have the procedure herself.

Today, the feisty 75-year-old regularly travels from her convent in Jamaica,

Queens, to WMC, in Valhalla, to speak at informational seminars to individuals contemplating the surgery and tell them how her life was completely transformed by it.

"She is genuinely a warm person who speaks from the heart," says her surgeon, Ashutosh Kaul, MD, Director of Minimally Invasive and Robotic Surgery. "She motivates and inspires patients, as she is a long-term success story. She's active in the postoperative support group, too, and is always available to counsel and guide anyone considering weight-loss surgery."

Sister Karen says she can hardly remember a time when she wasn't overweight. "I have been this way since I was 8 years old," she says. "It was the result of a trauma in my life. The only way I knew how to defend myself was to get big. My mother told me I gained weight overnight."

She is quick to point out that the surgery saved her life, but it isn't a magic bullet either. "The problems you have before the surgery still exist after it, and

they only resolve themselves with therapy, but the gastric bypass was the tool that allowed me to keep it off."

She ultimately lost more than 150 pounds, celebrating her 75th birthday as a whole new person. "I never, ever imagined I would live to see this day," she laughs, adding that she is now medication-free. "If I didn't have the surgery, Heaven would have been the best-case scenario, because the other possibilities are frightening — stroke, heart attack, bedridden, unable to care for myself. I'm convinced that's what would have happened."

Dr. Kaul agrees with that assessment and adds that Sister Karen is just one of the 3,500 success stories the hospital has had over the last 25 years.

"Sister Karen had an amazing transformation after the surgery," he says. "Her health issues, especially pulmonary and cardiac issues, dramatically improved, along with remarkable improvement in her mobility.

Today she is on a mission to pay it forward, by talking about the benefits of having the surgery while addressing the fear involved in facing the procedure.

"The first thing I tell people in the seminar is that it's normal to be afraid. Who wouldn't be afraid? Someone once told me I was so brave to do this, but it's not really bravery if you are not afraid," she explains. "I tell them that I thought I was going to die, and so many heads shake in agreement.

Today Sister Karen is ever-vigilant about how she eats and hasn't had a cookie or ice cream in 12 years. "I'm afraid, and I'm glad I'm afraid," she says. "I have a disease with food."

Regarding her surgery, Sister Karen says it was the best decision she ever made. "I feel amazing," she says. "I love my life. I just love it!" •

For more information about WMC's bariatrics seminars, go to www.westchestermedicalcenter/bariatricseminars

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