

Meet the woman who made a whole town slim!

As Linda Fondren's beloved sister, Mary, lay dying, she admitted, "I wish I'd lived my life more for myself." So Linda vowed to find a way to help every woman in town get the healthy lives they deserved . . .

By the shadowy light of a single lamp, Linda Fondren sat beside her sister, holding her hand.

Mary's voice was small as she spoke, her words slurred by the brain tumor that had ravaged her body, her life. Yet Linda understood clearly as Mary breathed, "I wish . . . I'd lived my life more for myself."

Suddenly, Linda felt as though her throat were clogged with shards of broken glass. Soon, she knew, tears stinging her eyes, her sister would be gone forever. And nobody should have those kinds of regrets . . .

For Linda, a healthy mind and body had always gone hand in hand. She just felt better—stronger, more alive—whenever she worked out or went for a heart-pumping run.

"If you find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere."

FRANK A. CLARK

"C'mon," she'd often urged Mary in better times. "Let's go take a walk."

More often than not, though, Mary was too busy. A single mother, she worked multiple jobs to make ends meet, grabbing whatever food she could along the way—until she'd packed 260 pounds on her 4'11" frame.

Though Mary dreamed of traveling, she'd sigh, "Airline seats are for skinny folks." And she always put herself last on her to-do list.

But then, Mary was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. And now, Linda realized, that in a life that would already be cut short, Mary had missed out on so much because she hadn't felt good about herself.

Soon after, Mary slipped away.

I miss you already! Linda wept. And she knew, too, that she had to do something to help other women like Mary. Before it was too late for them, too.

Helping Vicksburg shape up

So six months after losing Mary, Linda opened a gym in their hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Called Shape Up Sisters, it offered not only the latest workout equipment, aerobics and yoga classes, but also quick, personalized workouts, a smoothie bar to chat with friends, even free childcare! And because Linda recalled Mary saying she would've been too self-conscious to work out alongside men, Shape Up Sisters was entirely for women.

Soon, women who'd never set foot in a gym before were working with trainers.

"I love it here!" Vicksburg mom of four Janice Smyrl marveled. And as she and so many others thanked Linda, she knew they were realizing what Mary never had: that it wasn't selfish to do something for yourself on your lunch break, or to let the housework go a little. That in order to take care of others, you had to treat *yourself* well first.

Then, in 2009, Linda read an article that made her gasp: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mississippi was considered the fattest state in America.

Nobody wants to be overweight, Linda knew. But it's hard to change; harder still if you're going it alone.

So that night, she drew up a plan to give her community the tools they needed to slim down, and Shape Up Vicksburg (ShapeUpVicksburg.com) was born. She'd create an online weight loss diary. Start a walking club folks could join. And offer nutrition seminars and exercise classes free of charge.

"Help me help Vicksburg," she encouraged community officials. And jumping on board, restaurants added more low-calorie items to their menus. A local convention center was transformed into a gym where nurses performed health screenings. The local Walmart even set up a weigh-in station!



"We can all transform ourselves—and the world—for the better!" says Linda. Inset: Shape Up Vicksburg in action.

15,000 lbs lighter!

It wasn't easy. But as more and more residents—2,500 in all!—signed on to Shape Up Vicksburg, they began seeing results. And, losing pounds and inches, it gave them the inspiration to keep going. Even Mayor Paul Winfield lost 16 pounds!

But for so many, it wasn't just about the number on the scale.

"I can stop taking my high blood pressure and cholesterol meds now!" one woman rejoiced to Linda. "You've changed my life!"

She wasn't the only one. The first time 22-year-old Ebony stepped on the scale, she was devastated.

So, joining Shape Up Sisters, she made a pledge to lose weight—and has dropped 50 pounds! But when Ebony came for weigh-ins, her mom, also obese, would lay on the couch.

Then, overhearing that the family was struggling, Linda offered Ebony's mom a job babysitting at the gym. Touched by Linda's kindness, she also began working out there in her free time. And today, not only is she 35 pounds slimmer, she's also off food stamps!

"I used to barely move because of my arthritis," she marveled. "But now I can get around and feel great. And it's all because of you!"

Actually, Linda believes, it's because of Mary. "My sister's always been my motivation," she says. And in a year, Vicksburg residents have lost more than 15,000 pounds!

"It can take a while to learn to say, 'I'm important. I do count.' But we *all* count!" Linda says. "And I will keep doing this until everyone in Vicksburg has the happy, healthy, wonderful life they deserve!"

—Kristin Higson-Hughes

Photos: Hubert Worley/Zuma Press; Akinina Olena/Shutterstock.

Linda's best tips for getting slim!

✔ **Get rid of junk food!** When junk foods aren't as accessible, you'll be less likely to reach for them when you're hungry!

✔ **Snack first!** Going out to eat? Resist temptation simply by enjoying a healthy

snack before you leave home. You'll feel fuller and more motivated to make smart choices!

✔ **Increase your cardio!** Indulged in a slice of cake or glass of wine? Don't let it set you back! Just do an extra 10 minutes of cardio the next day.

