

## Reading: Fat Frank

### A The problems of being fat

“Fat Frank” Banks is unrecognizable from five years ago. At 1.98m and 115kg he’s still a large man, but a shadow of his former self. Sitting at his kitchen table he describes what it was like to be one of the most obese people in America.

42 year old Banks, a teacher from Chicago, said that he used to be mocked by people when he went shopping, he couldn’t use the public lavatories and he suffered from severe body odour because of the sweat trapped in the folds of his flesh. It was an effort to lift himself from his chair at home and go to work in his truck. And arriving at work he would be left gasping for breath having staggered from the truck to the front door of his classroom.

He is disappointed that he couldn’t go to his brother’s wedding in New Orleans because he couldn’t afford the two seats the airline demanded for the flight. He didn’t go to the cinema or theatre for 20 years because he was too large to sit in one of the seats. He was still able to go to his favourite restaurant though – he took his own specially designed chair with him. The chair was so big however that it had to be put in the back of his truck, and the restaurant had to open its double doors so that Banks and the chair could go inside.

His home also had to be adapted for his huge size. The bathtub had to be removed because he could no longer climb into it and was replaced with a walk-in shower. “Even going to the bathroom to do your business is a problem you have to learn to cope with,” he says.

Eventually Banks weighed an astonishing 347kg and had a waist measuring 214cm. His spine was being crushed by the pressure of his stomach whenever he stood up. He realized then that he had to choose between dieting or death.

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### B Why and how he got fat

Banks says he was not the kind of guy who gorges constantly. "You get bigger a little at a time. The bigger you get, the less activity you do, and the bigger you get." For Banks it was a vicious circle.

While other obese people may eat 12 eggs all in one go Banks didn't even have breakfast. Instead he regularly ate a packet or two of cheese crackers and peanut butter biscuits throughout the morning. Then he discovered that if he volunteered to do lunch duty at a local elementary school he would be given the leftovers as the cooks always made too much food for the kids. He would then go home and have another lunch! "I'd sit down and eat a meal full of carbohydrates, sodium and sugar. Then I'd have an ordinary dinner in the evening – burgers, or something like that – but instead of having just one portion like everyone else I'd have two or three." Banks never counted the calories and continued to eat all he wanted. If he had counted however, he would have reached a figure close to 10,000 calories for his daily intake.

He insists he was not unhappy either. He didn't mind being one of the fattest people in America. And he had no problems finding a girlfriend and getting married. He met his wife Thelma when he was 25 and already weighed about 300kg. "My love life? Well, I'm still happy and I'm still married. It is just another thing you learn to deal with," he says.

Thelma laughs, and adds: "There's a lot less to love now, but a lot more loving! But his size was never a problem for me. He has a wicked sense of humour and I always saw beyond what everyone else saw, he's a really nice guy, and always was."

The children at his school didn't mock him either even when he grew so big that he couldn't get off his chair to write on the whiteboard.

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### C Why and how he lost weight

When Banks was 37 he realized that he had serious health problems. In hospital he was told he was developing cellulitis in his legs, a condition that can lead to gangrene and amputation. He was also told that he could lose his legs within a year – and his life within three or four. In fact the doctors were amazed he had managed to reach the age of 37 at all.

He was given a choice, one last opportunity to save his life: if he lost 45kg then the surgeons would perform gastric by-pass surgery. However, after the surgery Banks would have to stay on a very strict diet, no more alcohol and only one burger at a time. For most people this may be acceptable but for Banks the idea was totally unacceptable. He decided to simply diet and not have the surgery.

So Banks and a dietician worked out a daily regime of 2,200 calories which would allow him to still eat his favourite foods. The diet was an incredible success: over two and a half years he lost an average of 7.8kg a month losing a total of almost 230kg. This is understood to be the largest amount lost without the help of surgery. Even now Banks enjoys peanut butter and burgers and drinks the odd beer, he just eats a lot less.

Was it difficult for him to do? “Not at all,” he replies. “To be with Thelma, to see our nephews and nieces grow up, to continue to be the big brother to my younger brothers and sisters – all of these things are so important to me that I had the motivation to keep to the diet.”

Not long ago Banks was walking through a park when he met some of his former pupils. They were astonished to see how their teacher had changed. “In fact they were in shock,” Banks laughs. “And then they were in tears – they were so pleased to see me like this!”