

Fat! Fit? Fabulous!

Meet the East Bay activists and researchers at the center of the new civil-rights movement known as Health at Every Size.

By *Lauren Gard*

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The last thing Lake Merritt pedestrians expected to see on a recent Thursday afternoon was a fat, vibrant woman inviting them to step onto a scale. "Would you like a free compliment?" Marilyn Wann called out to a group of teenage girls on the concrete path. She motioned to the scale, which she'd covered with pink paint and sparkly silver paper. Silver pipe cleaners across the bottom spelled "YAY!"

A lanky girl with long braids pulled into a ponytail eyed the glittery object with suspicion. "I do *not* need to know my weight," she said defiantly.

"Oh, this won't give you a number, only a compliment," Wann said, her vintage aluminum-framed glasses glinting in the sunlight.

"What is it?" the girl asked.

"It's a Yay Scale."

The girl squinted at it for a moment, still clearly confused, then shrugged and stepped on. The dial spun and came to rest.

"You're *gorgeous*," Wann announced.

"Ooh, that's nice," the girl replied with a grin. Soon her friends had all clambered on to take their own Yay readings.

"What are you doing this for?" asked one who'd just been declared "*fine*!"

"I'm part of a group of people who try to encourage good nutrition and fitness, whatever your size," Wann said, handing each teen a slip of pink paper listing five body-positive Web sites.

Within an hour, several dozen people had collected such spontaneous flattery. A father and his teenage son riding their

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Marilyn Wann demonstrates her "Yay" scale, which doles out compliments instead of numbers.

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Former Big Burlesque dancer Cookie Woolner is part of a growing group of fat-studies scholars.

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bikes: "What a way to make a guy's day," the father said after being deemed *sexy*. "And look at that — my son is *fine!*" A toned jogger in her twenties whose face initially fell when she realized the scale wouldn't divulge her weight: "*Yummy,*" she read with a smile, after stepping on anyway. "That's better than 140, right?"

A few people recognized Wann, who proselytized body acceptance in a black T-shirt and her signature hot-pink attire of pedalpusher jeans, suede loafers, and a purse: "Are you Marilyn?" a young woman asked. "The one who wrote *Fat!So?*"

"Yes, that's me," Wann admitted, blushing so her cheeks matched her bubblegum-hued MAC lipstick.

"I love that book," the girl gushed before asking Wann to autograph the handout. "It really helped me!"

At 39, Wann is the uncontested queen of the modern American fat-pride movement. The San Francisco resident carries around a hundred or so pounds more than the US government thinks she should. When she was denied health insurance in 1993 based solely on that fact, she launched a protest zine called *Fat!So?*, which evolved into a book that has sold fifteen thousand copies, which in turn inspired a popular Web site, all of which have given way to a thriving speaking career. Wann began making Yay Scales five years ago, and now offers them up via word of mouth and, soon, through VoluptuArt.com, an online shop stocked solely with body-positive art that will be run by Richmond therapist Nomi Dekel.

Wann is many things: "Flabaliscious," according to a pal's testimony on her Friendster page. An avid exerciser who hits the gym twice a week, then changes into a two-piece suit to swim laps. The rare woman who has dieted just once in her life. And a huge fan of the F word: "It's not about size, it's about fat. So let's call it that." But she is first and foremost content with her body. And she says she's in excellent health — as is her fat, thriving 82-year-old mother.

More than thirty years after the East Bay gave birth to the disability-rights movement and launched the first Center for Independent Living in the United States, it has become the epicenter of another civil-rights crusade that has the potential to affect the way an even greater number of Americans experience life. The Health at Every Size movement says that regardless of what they weigh, everyone can be just like Wann: healthy and happy. According to its supporters, the so-called obesity epidemic does not exist; weight loss is not only near-impossible, it's near-pointless; and fat acceptance should be a rule, not the exception.

Try that on for size.



The Fly Girls aren't shy about the big booties in their pants.

Gabriela Hasbun



Cassandra Falby's Datgurl clothing line offers custom-made T-shirts for larger women.

Gabriela Hasbun



The Padded Lilies do extra-large synchronized swimming routines.

Fierce opposition to the public-health campaigns targeting obesity burns at the core of the

Health at Every Size philosophy. Ordering two-thirds of Americans to whittle their waistlines, advocates say, will not produce a healthier population. This is partly because modern science has yet to come up with a prescription for permanent weight loss. Despite the fact that Americans pour some \$50 billion a year into diet plans, pills, and books, 95 percent of all weight-loss attempts crash and burn, and the vast majority of people who manage to shed any weight gain it all back and then some. At least, that's what Health at Every Size advocates will tell you.

"The diet industry is a fabulous business because it never works, and people always blame themselves," said Elizabeth Scott of the Body Positive, a youth outreach organization in Berkeley that has trained more than a hundred teens to teach the Health at Every Size message in schools throughout the Bay Area. As activists note, in nearly any other industry this mentality would be unthinkable.

In reality, very little is known about long-term success rates. Commercial programs maintain remarkably lousy — if any — records tracking clients' results. As for best-selling books — forget it. Weight Watchers makes perhaps the best effort to back up its claims: The company's 2004 study of members who'd reached their goal weights found that after five years, half had kept off at least 5 percent, or six pounds. But what that study failed to address was the percentage of members who actually realized their goals. A company spokesman referred to that magic number as "proprietary information that we don't provide to the general public." A separate 2001 study analyzing 29 structured-weight-loss studies reached a more promising conclusion: At the five-year mark, the typical dieter had maintained a six-pound weight loss, or about 25 percent of what she'd lost at the conclusion of the diet. Yet there were flaws in this report, too. In some of the studies, nearly half of all participants were missing in action by the five-year follow-up.

Still, there are plenty of people, such as science journalist Michael Fumento, author of *The Fat of the Land: The Obesity Epidemic and How Overweight Americans Can Help Themselves*, who argue that sustained weight loss is entirely possible. Fumento, for one, thinks it requires people turning their back on the diet industry and undertaking a lifestyle overhaul on their own — as he did when he dropped thirty pounds ten years ago.

"People don't understand the best ways to lose weight because they're constantly being lied to," he griped. "Look at the diet book industry. To do well, you have to tell people what they want to hear as opposed to what they need to hear." Our society is so crazy, he contends, that we buy millions of diet books from fat authors like Dr. Robert Atkins, who was overweight and almost obese when he dropped dead of a heart attack.

The primary reason for the antidiet stance of Joanne Ikeda, founding codirector of UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health, is that making fat people feel crappy by denouncing their bodies does not inspire them to get healthier. Nor does blaming them for soaring health-care costs encourage adherence to strict eating and exercise regimes. Instead, she argues, public health programs need to focus on lifestyle alone: Encourage people to eat nutritious foods, be physically active, and learn to respect and accept themselves.

"There's no research to show that body dissatisfaction motivates people to lose weight," Ikeda said. "If you think you're worthless, is that motivating? Only when you make people feel good will they be empowered to adopt a more positive lifestyle. There's this idea out there that if we

let fat people be happy with their bodies, then everybody would become fat. It's crazy!"

What's also crazy, Health at Every Size advocates say, is the measure currently used to sort people into weight-based categories, and often to measure overall health. The Body Mass Index (BMI) is based solely on height and weight. A "normal" BMI ranges from just under 19 to 25; for instance, a woman who's five foot four and weighs anywhere from 110 to 144 pounds, or a five-foot-ten man weighing 132 to 173. Come in below 18.5, and you're "underweight." Top a BMI of 25, and you're "overweight." Climb above 30, and you're "obese." The spine-tingling "morbid" label enters the equation when a person's BMI exceeds 40, about the equivalent of carrying one hundred excess pounds. Most Health at Every Size activists reject these terms as judgmental.

"Our entire society has been brainwashed into believing that obesity is an unnatural condition linked to all of these horrible diseases, and that there's nothing good about being fat," said Ikeda, whose team recently launched Nourish, a Web site loaded with size-acceptance resources for UC Berkeley students. She points to a hotly contested paper published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in April 2005. A team of researchers at the Centers for Disease Control analyzed data from several major federal studies conducted between 1976 and 2000 and concluded that people in the "overweight" category have slightly *less* risk of death than those in the so-called "normal-weight" category. Underweight and obese individuals at the extreme ends of the spectrum face the greatest risk. The researchers, led by Katherine Flegal, put the number of obesity-related deaths at 112,000 a year. It was a drastic dip from the 365,000 estimate that other CDC researchers were using just four months earlier — among them director Julie Gerberding, who in a public speech had referred to the "pandemic of obesity" as a threat akin to the plague in the Middle Ages.

Still, the US Department of Health and Human Services, anti-obesity organizations, and many journalists continue to report far higher numbers, culled from other studies. The one that crops up most often is 300,000, which was first reported in a 1993 *JAMA* article.

Flegal told Australia's ABC National Radio in March that before undertaking the study, she accepted the widespread belief that there was a relationship between being overweight and dying prematurely. She said her team was surprised by what it discovered, but shouldn't have been. "I think it's a mistake to look at weight as though it were a toxic substance," she explained. "It's not a toxic substance like lead or cadmium that poisons you so that each additional kilo is worse and worse. The effects of weight on health may be quite different from different causes of mortality."

Many experts agree with the Health at Every Size camp's belief that BMI is a fairly useless measure. Last month, the British medical journal *The Lancet* published results of a study in which scientists analyzed forty heart-disease studies involving a total of 250,000 subjects. They found that among people with cardiovascular problems, overweight people were less likely to die than those of normal weight — perhaps because they have more muscle than their thinner peers. "The results therefore demonstrate the inability of BMI to discriminate between body fat and lean muscle," they concluded. Also last month, David E. Cundiff, head of the department of exercise science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, published an article in the *International Journal of Obesity* titled "BMI: a poor surrogate for diet and exercise in assessing risk of death."

In response to the rising tide of research interest on obesity, Palo Alto psychologist Debora Burgard started an e-mail discussion list a few years ago called Show Me the Data, which circulates findings from obesity-related studies among 150 health-care providers, researchers, and archivists. The group's aim is to discern whether that data actually supports researchers' stated results. One of the major challenges of most studies linking obesity to disease is proving causality. For instance, just because numerous studies show a fat person may be more likely than a thin one to acquire diabetes, who's to say the person's weight alone is to blame? "It may be entirely plausible that if you're heavier and you have a history of dieting more, you'll develop more health problems," Burgard said. "Or if you're heavier and face more stigma, oppression, and rejection — well, what's the cumulative health effect of those experiences? Maybe these are diseases that really aren't about fatness per se!"

Marion Nestle, a nutritionist at New York University who spent last spring at UC Berkeley, is not so sure. She contends that the Health at Every Size approach is a potentially messy one, since biological risk plays a major part in the development of health problems: "If an overweight person is unlucky enough to be predisposed to Type 2 diabetes, then being overweight is not a good idea." And while Nestle allows that many overweight people may be healthy, she believes that "lots more are not." She pounds her weight-loss mantra into the pages of her recent guide *What to Eat*. "Eat less, move more, eat more fruits and vegetables, and go easy on junk food."

But Nestle admits that following her own instructions is quite a challenge for most Americans. "We live in an environment that promotes eating more food, in more places, at more times, and in larger portions," she said. "We now have tons of research showing that nobody can resist overeating in that kind of environment."

Perhaps surprisingly, given their stinging critique of an entire sector of the US economy, people such as Nestle abound in the world of publishing. But that's not the case with their counterparts. University of Colorado School of Law Professor Paul Campos tackled such issues in his 2004 book *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health*. Getting it published, however, was no simple feat. Campos easily acquired a top-rate agent, but no major publishers would touch his manuscript. Only after nabbing tons of attention from an article he wrote in *The New Republic* did publishers start biting. "It was a long struggle of a year, but it resulted in a huge amount of media coverage, and now people are paying attention," he said. "For a while, people like Marilyn Wann and Glenn Gaesser and I were lonely voices in the wilderness. Now there are a lot more of us."

Gaesser, who collected three degrees from UC Berkeley and now directs the kinesiology program at the University of Virginia, had an even more hellish time when he attempted to sell an antidiets book a decade ago. "The only reason a few publishers bit was that they were somewhat fascinated by the idea of a book about fat being overstated as a health problem being written by a thin person," he said. In fact, before Gaesser's agent even agreed to represent him, she asked about his weight. "She said if I were fat I'd just be viewed as a fat person rationalizing his existence, with an ax to grind."

By his own admittance, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health* flopped when it was finally released by Ballantine in 1996. "It probably set some kind of publishing record for the ratio of most media attention to least sales," he said. Reporters gobbled up Gaesser's controversial ideas, but puzzled-looking patrons consistently approached him at

book signings and asked, "Where's the program?" Gaesser calls it an exposé people weren't ready for. Still, it changed his life, sparking more than 150 lectures all over the world, and countless interviews. Calls still come from journalists nearly every time a major obesity study is released, which he considers a good sign even if his published quotes usually consist of a one- or two-line rebuttal.

Yet Gaesser has serious doubts that the Health at Every Size approach will be co-opted by the mainstream any time soon. "Aside from medical issues, you have our culture, which is absolutely intolerant of body fat," he said. "Even if you say, 'My blood pressure is fine,' someone will reply, 'But you're still fat. I can't stand the way you look.'"

Linda Bacon, an El Cerrito-based nutritionist who conducts research at UC Davis and teaches at San Francisco City College, is far more optimistic. Her agent is currently shopping her recently completed book, which will be the first focusing specifically on Health at Every Size. Bacon's publishing effort comes on the heels of a two-year study she codirected, the results of which were published last year in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. Bacon and UC Davis Professor Judith Stern instructed half of a group of 78 women to consume less, exercise more, keep a daily food diary, and pay frequent visits to the scale. The rest of the women were told to eat according to internal hunger cues, reflect on how certain foods made them feel, consider what obstacles were keeping them from being more physically active, and attend a support group stressing self-acceptance. Each group met weekly for six months and monthly for six more months, with a follow-up a year later. Some 58 percent of the dieters dropped out during the first year, compared to only 8 percent of the Health at Every Size group. And at the two-year mark, any successes achieved by the dieting group (including, on average, an initial 5 percent weight loss) had vanished. The nondieters, however, managed to maintain a major increase in activity level, lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and heightened self-esteem — even though they didn't lose weight.

"It's not about having better control, or denying yourself, but about paying attention to signals and respecting your body," Bacon said. "I believe this approach is sustainable."

Now, for just a moment, suppose that science did prove that fat people will suffer horrifically debilitating diseases and keel over well before their time. Does that make it okay to discriminate against them? Where is the rationale for limiting their ability to do what they want while they're still alive?

Fat acceptance as a civil-rights issue is the basis upon which the Oakland-based National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance was formed in 1969. In recent years, the organization has had some growing pains, but treasurer Frances White said ambitious new efforts lie ahead. "In the past, a lot of our work has been reactive," she said. "Now we're more interested in being proactive." At its annual convention in August — which White refers to as a "family reunion" — the association, which fully embraces Health at Every Size, announced a plan for drastically reduced membership fees and the launch of several major initiatives.

A legal advocacy program will educate attorneys about size discrimination, push for legislation, and create a nationwide database of attorneys willing to take on such cases. Association members, including White, Wann, and Burgard, were instrumental in the San Francisco City Council's 2000 adoption of an ordinance banning weight and height discrimination in housing

and employment. Only Santa Cruz, the state of Michigan, and Washington, DC, have approved similar guidelines. Two additional databases also are in the works: One will invite members to rate how well various businesses accommodate people of size, and the other will be a list of fat-friendly health-care providers.

As doctors have come under increasing pressure to do their part in solving the so-called obesity epidemic, the relationship between doctors and fat patients has become increasingly contentious, activists say. For many larger people, being in the same room with a doctor is about as appealing as ripping off a hangnail. Pat Lyons, the program director of WomanCare Plus, an Oakland nonprofit that aims to improve large women's access to health care, said she knows firsthand how physicians often treat their heavier patients, because she's been one all her life. They often have one cure for any ailment a patient describes. Headache, sprained ankle, sore throat? Lose weight!

"I've been the same weight for twenty years, but in doctors' computers I'm listed as having a weight problem," lamented Lyons, who coauthored with Burgard the country's first fitness guide for large women back in 1988 and is often credited with launching the Health at Every Size philosophy. "I still have to deal with doctors who think I should lose weight, even being as empowered as I am."

Carrying excess weight is definitely unhealthy in one sense, Lyons has found. That's because heavier women are often less inclined to seek medical care. A major study she helped conduct of nearly five hundred obese women found that the more a woman weighed, the more likely she was to delay pelvic exams, Pap smears, and mammograms. Women who dieted often were also less likely to go to the doctor. In addition, Lyons' team surveyed more than one hundred doctors and nurses. Most reported having received little, if any, training on treating larger patients, and indicated that it was more difficult for them to do.

The change Lyons is seeking in the medical arena is not rocket science. She merely wants doctors to address fat patients' medical concerns in the exact same way they'd handle those of thin ones. In other words, physicians should use all the diagnostic tools they have at their disposal. "It's the sense that 'I know everything about you when I can see your body fat,'" she said. "They need to stop making assumptions."

Fat folks are increasingly channeling such aggravations into political action. Big Fat Blog, a six-year-old discussion-heavy site, was established by Web developer Paul McAleer as a place to critique "the media's horrible portrayal of fat people." It currently boasts close to 2,000 registered users and 90,000 unique visitors a month. Personal diet talk is strictly prohibited, McAleer said: "There are plenty of places on the Web for those things already."

In 2003, Oakland sound designer Amanda Piasecki founded another popular blog, Fatshionistas. "I basically just wanted to start a community where people could talk about fashion and about its underlying personal politics," she said. "People put themselves through insane dieting antics with the ultimate intent of finding clothes, and that seems kind of ridiculous when you stop to pick it apart. Not having access to particular kinds of clothing may seem like a superficial thing, but it may also mean you don't have access to certain social circles, or jobs, or any number of things that people who can look a certain way do."

More than seven hundred users have joined the site, a prerequisite to post. Regular posters range from fat-pride activists to those who are openly self-hating; from women who consider themselves fat at a size twelve to others who argue that a size twelve is minuscule. And there are tons of teenagers. "If I'd had a resource like this when I was a teen, it would have completely changed my perspective on the world," said Piasecki, who spends twenty hours maintaining the ad-free blog in a typical week.

On a recent visit, the first few posts featured women seeking shopping advice ("I need a black mini skirt ... I can't seem to find one in a size twenty ANYWHERE. So far I've looked at all the usual suspects: LB [Lane Bryant], Old Navy, Gap, Target, Wal-mart and nada"); sharing photos of themselves decked out in new acquisitions ("my new FAVORITE article of clothing is this little gem from Torrid"), and bitching about discrimination.

"I was just wondering if there are any other University fatshionistas that I can commiserate with," one young woman wrote. "I attend a medium-size University ... that I feel hates fat people. The desks in many of the classrooms are SUPER small, and I really don't fit in them. It sucks. To make matters even worse, I always seem to be THE ONLY fat girl in a class." Among the dozen responses were several suggesting concrete ways to resolve the problem, and this, from a fellow college student: "I think I know what you're talking about. I have to sit in the aisle, otherwise there is literally nowhere to put my legs — the desks are way too low. I'm really glad that I'm only in class about 3 hours a day." An embedded link displayed a photo of the girl posed sidesaddle in her chair, a knowing smile splayed across her face.

To accommodate fatshionistas whose passion for politics has wholly overtaken their interest in clothes, a few months ago Piasecki and co-moderator Lesley Kinzel, a grad student in Boston, started two new offshoots. Fatshionitis focuses on medical issues, while Fatshionism invites participants to examine fat politics through the lens of social justice.

Fat also is getting more face time than ever in academic fields from econ to art. In 2006, the area of fat studies was incorporated into the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association for the first time. "There's absolutely increased interest," said the associations' fat-studies chair Stefanie Snider, a Ph.D student in art history at USC. "It's really only in the past five years that it's begun to be established. It's one of those arenas that really calls for interdisciplinary work."

But don't expect the escalating interest in fat acceptance to give way to academic fat-studies departments anytime soon. Or even classes, for that matter. Snider imagines that a "body diversity" class is much more likely. Robert Bucholz agrees. "It seems to be that to be fair, you'd need thin studies, short studies, tall studies ... though I could see something to do with bodies. Body studies? I could certainly see an interest in this, and a need for it."

When Bucholz, a history professor at Loyola University of Chicago who stands five foot ten and weighs about 170 pounds, shares his interest in the field with his colleagues, he ordinarily receives a two-pronged reaction. First, a hearty laugh. Then, an admonition: "You can't be serious!"

Oh, but he is. Bucholz has a book in the works about the understanding of fatness in England during the Tudor-Stuart period. He has a catchy title in mind, too: *Density's Children: Transgressive Bodies in Early Modern England*. In November he will present a related paper

at a pop-culture conference in Indianapolis. Digging up data on historical heft requires a bit more ingenuity than finding details on, say, the history of parliament, but once his peers hear that such evidence does exist, and how it connects in a broader cultural sense, they quickly come around, he said.

At the same session, San Francisco State grad student Cookie Woolner plans to share a paper on the role of voluptuous women on the 19th-century stage. She knows a bit about modern-day theater of the full-bodied, too, having danced in a twelve-woman kick line as part of the San Francisco-based troupe Big Burlesque. While Woolner enjoys performing on a personal level, making an impact is a major part of the appeal: "People who see me, at five foot eight and 230 pounds, stripping down to my pasties, might say, 'There's a bigger girl and she feels positively about her body ... how great for her!' Or maybe, 'If she feels good about herself, then maybe I can, too.'"

Woolner views her teaching as activist, too. Last year she had students in an undergrad course read some of her favorite fat-positive tracts. "It was a bit of a tough crowd, but to stand in front of a group of people and send the message that it's okay to be fat, no matter what you've been told ... a lot of people have never heard that idea in their lives," she said. "I think it can give people a feeling of freedom."

Woolner will soon have another book to add to future students' required reading list. Berkeley attorney Sondra Solovay, author of *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination*, and University of Vermont psychology professor Esther Rothblum, are currently editing an anthology tentatively titled the *Fat Studies Reader*. Marilyn Wann, who keeps more than 170 members of a fat-studies e-mail list apprised of happenings in the field, has been charged with writing the book's introduction, a task that has required her to lay out the argument for why fat studies deserves a place in academia. One point she plans to drive home is that it's not a subject that only a particular group of people can relate to. In our fat-hating culture, she says, it applies to everyone. "The people who aren't directly targeted with fat hatred are targeted with fear and anxiety around their bodies," she said. "You're either fat or afraid of becoming fat, so everybody has a stake."

STRUTTIN' THEIR STUFF

The Phat Fly Girls and Padded Lilies don't let their bodies get in the way of their fun.

By Lauren Gard

Hip-hop dance squad the Phat Fly Girls are one of several East Bay women's groups who refuse to let their bodies stop them from pursuing their passion. On a Saturday afternoon in August, three of the Girls blocked out a routine in a mirror-walled studio in South Berkeley. A familiar tune from the musical *Chicago* played on the stereo, though the lyrics to this particular rendition of "Cell Block Tango," penned by dancer Marina Wolf Ahmad of the troupe's New York chapter, were a tad different from the ones Catherine Zeta-Jones sang in the movie. So, too, is the song's title: "One-Ton Tango."

"It's about getting revenge," director Matilda St. John explained to a reporter as a dancer swept

gracefully across the floor while reciting a verse about trying on a dress and then attempting to buy it. St. John, portraying a skinny department-store clerk — a role they'll later hire an outside dancer for — took one look at the customer and informed her that they didn't carry anything in her size. "That's all right," the dancer harrumphed, chin high, turning to the audience. "As soon as the doctor surgically removes my credit card from her ass, I can wash it off and look somewhere else."

Another dancer described confronting a man at the supermarket who wouldn't stop looking at the groceries in her basket. "He's staring at my pork chops so hard they're practically frying in their plastic wrap," she recalled. Next thing she knew, she'd blacked out and come to with her hands covered in the blood of something or someone. "Cleanup at register five!" a clerk called out over the loudspeaker. The dancers sang and danced in unison: *They had it coming ... They had it coming ... They had it coming all along ... I didn't do it ... But if I done it ... How could you tell me that I was wrong?*

St. John, a writer and psychotherapist who works from a Health at Every Size approach, founded the Phat Fly Girls five years ago. "I've always loved to dance, but as I got older it became too intimidating to go to a dance studio," she said after the rehearsal. "Teachers would say, 'You've got to lose weight,' and that became more and more uncomfortable."

Today, she fields a regular stream of inquiries from would-be members. One of the biggest challenges facing newcomers is to stop trying to make themselves look smaller. "Larger dancers are so used to dancing in the back and trying to minimize their movements," she said. "We encourage each other to make the most noise, to exaggerate, to jiggle."

While they're serious dancers, the Phat Fly Girls don't take themselves too seriously. Case in point: One of the group's classic numbers is performed to a thumping, infectious tune featuring six oft-repeated words guaranteed to lodge permanently in your brain: *Too much booty in your pants!* When they performed the sexy, whirlwind routine at Cal State East Bay, the audience was initially hesitant, unsure how to react. "At first, they didn't know if they could laugh," St. John said. "But there *is* humor in it."

What the group's members don't find funny are some of the media requests they get, such as the national evening news program that wanted to film the group's annual fund-raiser, a chocolate reception held in December. "I invited them to a practice, but they had no interest in watching us dance," St. John said. "What they wanted to do was film a bunch of fat women eating chocolate." The intended topic of the news program? A modern-day exploration of the seven deadly sins. "They wanted us to represent gluttony. They kept asking, and we kept telling them no."

The local athletic posse that has attracted the most national attention — and perhaps been the most brazen in their unabashed body love — is a synchronized swim team known as the Padded Lilies. The Lilies have been the subject of myriad magazine articles, documentaries, and entertainment news shows. They've even held their own against a snarky Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*. "Leno himself was a little bit of an ass," ringleader Shirley Sheffield recalls. "He was trying to be unkind, but we wouldn't let him."

Sheffield conjured up the idea for the group in 1997 during a weekly swim for large women held at the public pool in Albany. "I just happened to notice that women would be bobbing up

and down and doing water aerobics, and it kind of looked like synchronized swimming," she said. "It's a kind of funny thing anyway, and it occurred to me that fat women doing it would be *really* funny." So she signed on an instructor, recruited a dozen women, and started shopping for waterproof fabric.

When they debuted a piece called "Broadway Babes," clad in gold lamé vests and top hats, the crowd at the annual water show went wild. As with the Phat Fly Girls at Cal State, Sheffield said she didn't know how they'd be received, but the Lilies brought the house down. It's a reaction they've gotten ever since. As they strode down the hallway toward the set of *The Tonight Show*, staffers lined the hallways to applaud them. "I'm not ever sure what nerve it strikes," she said. "I think it's just us getting out there and not being afraid of our bodies."

Their coach moved away in 2004, but the Lilies still perform on occasion. These days, it's primarily when the media comes calling. Sheffield and three others comprise the core group, welcoming anyone who wants to jump in for any period of time. "A lot of women who join us have never worn makeup, have never felt comfortable wearing bathing suits in public," she said. "We tart 'em up with makeup and make 'em wear goofy swim caps. They perform and have a wonderful time, and then they move on. That's all they want."

What Sheffield, who swims three hours a week, wants is for society to understand is that being fat isn't a limitation. In February, Australian filmmaker Kim Farrant spent five days with her for a documentary on people living with what many might take to be bodily liabilities: a dancer without legs, a female-to-male transsexual, a recovering anorexic and bulimic, and a woman who survived breast cancer. And then there's Sheffield. "I'm cast as the fat chick," she said with a laugh. "I told the producer, 'Let's talk about age! Age is my issue right now. I'm always been fat and have no issues with that, but getting older is something else. Ignore the fact that I'm fat and it'll drive the audience crazy. They'll be going — *But isn't she fat? Why aren't you talking about that?*'"

As part of the process, Sheffield was interviewed nude and posed full-frontal for a figure-drawing class at Studio One in North Oakland. The film, *Naked on the Inside*, is slated to premiere at Sundance in January, with an airing on Showtime to follow. Sheffield said she's received several e-mails from the filmmaker's staff, raving about her segment. One woman wrote that she now wears dresses after not doing so for years: "I watched you and feel like I need to get into my body and celebrate it."

Sheffield said she's been two things for as far back as she can remember: fat, and ornery as hell. She'll never know which came first, but together they've proven a powerful combination. "I feel like, why does somebody get to limit me if I don't feel limited myself? So I always got up into people's faces if they said anything negative to me. I see it as my mission to encourage other women to do that, too."

FATSHIONISTAS

Large women attempt to fill the plus-size style gap.

By Lauren Gard

The East Bay isn't merely a mecca for equal-opportunity exercise. It's also a hotspot for the fashion-conscious — a category fat women are increasingly joining. Frances White of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance said that when she was growing up, "I had a navy-blue, brown, and a black dress. That's about it."

Today, finding clothes that fit, whether you're fifteen or fifty, is far easier. For starters, Lane Bryant has company. Thanks to the more than 60 percent of American women and men who slip on a size fourteen or larger, the plus-size industry raked in \$32 billion in 2005, up 50 percent from five years earlier. Men's options have grown, too. Last month the country's predominant chain for larger guys, formerly known as Casual Male Big & Tall, rebranded itself as Casual Male XL. A company press release pointed to the move as a sign that bigger sizes are "becoming an accepted part of American society." Still, there is plenty of room for improvement.

When Cassandra Falby moved to Oakland from Michigan several years ago, she was jazzed at the prospect of whiling away weekend afternoons in trendy local boutiques. Problem was, as she wound her way through fashion-forward districts like the Mission, Hayes Valley, and Rockridge, she found few shops that carried clothes in her size. Even the Gap, which offers a plus-size collection online, stocks few such pieces in its stores. Nor were store clerks eager to deal with her.

So two years ago, Falby started a line of T-shirts called Datgurl — "Funky Threads for Thick Chicks." The phrase "curvygurl" sashays across her most popular T, while another top-seller reads "I [heart] my natural tan." The only shirt for men, available in both regular and larger sizes, states "I love dem curvygurls." Flattering plus-size designs proved to be in short supply, so Falby has each size custom-made. This means they're pricier to produce than regular-size Ts, so she's had to gradually reinvest her earnings in order to build the line. Eventually, the Pixar administrator hopes to expand beyond her online shop and the tables she sets up at women-centered conferences. She finds it particularly amusing when thin women ooh and aah over her shirts, then ask if she'll soon be making them in their size, too. "It's such a fascinating question, because in some ways it's flipping the script," she said. "For the first time, these women are entering a world in which something might not fit them." Her answer? Never.

And then there is GrandStyle.com, a fat-positive shopping site created ten years ago by Livermore resident Susan Weber. A former plus-size consultant for AOL ("I was sort of the Dear Abby of the plus-size world"), Weber now plays personal shopper by amalgamating hundreds of photos and descriptions of garments from online retailers. When someone clicks through and buys an item, she scores a small kickback. Weber and her guest columnists also offer advice on hundreds of diverse topics, from getting into the modeling biz (try a plus-size pageant) to flying comfortably (pack a seatbelt extender in your carry-on) to scuba diving (consider a trip to Hawaii with Big Adventures, founded by Oakland psychologist Liz Nickels).

Weber, who is staunchly antidiets and believes that women's closets should contain only clothing that actually fits them, receives about twenty requests a month for lucrative cross-linking with diet-related sites. But she refuses to go there. "My goal is to teach women that it's okay to be who you are, not that being a certain size is only a temporary situation," she said. "Once you realize that everyone isn't looking at you, that you're not the center of everyone's universe, you can move on from there. It's the same thing someone who has a disfiguring scar might tell you. Don't just sit there and say your weight is holding you back."

FAT & FAB

Online resources mentioned in the article—and a few cool extras that weren't.

Education

Health at Every Size Journal Gurze.com/client/client_pages/newsletterhes.cfm

Body Positive, an info-packed site run by local psychologist Debby Burgard

BodyPositive.com

Nourish, a UC Berkeley-run site geared toward college students

Nutrition.berkeley.edu/nourish

About Face, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that looks critically at the representation of girls and women in the media, and does related outreach About-Face.org

BBW Magazine: An online magazine for "Big Beautiful Women," published in print from 1979 to 2003 BBWMagazine.com

Images from San Francisco photographer Laurie Toby Edison's fine-art book, *Women En Large* LaurieTobyEdison.com/galleryWEL.asp

Author and activist Marilyn Wann's site FatSo.com

Shopping

Datgurl T-shirts: Datgurl.com

"Love Your Body" bracelets: Love-Your-Body.org

Curvz Ahead, a locally run eBay-based shop specializing in supersize clothing: Stores.ebay.com/Curvz-Ahead

Fitness

The Phat Fly Girls (hip-hop) and Mass Movement (modern dance) BigMoves.org

Yoga for Large Women SallyPugh.org

Fat Chance Belly Dance FCBD.com

San Francisco-based personal trainer Cinder Ernst CinderErnst.com

For Kids and Teens

Phat Camp, a fat-positive discussion group and Chicago-based retreat program
MoreThanJustPhat.com

The Body Positive, a Berkeley-based organization that educates kids, teens and parents
TheBodyPositive.org

Participate

National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance NAAFA.org

Share your story with Portland activist Stacy Bias, who is interviewing women for a book tentatively titled *FatGirl Speaks* StacyBias.net

Participate in an ongoing study of health habits Albany.edu/~drewa/health

Fatshionista blog Community.livejournal.com/fatshionista

Critique the media BigFatBlog.com

Add a fat-friendly health-care provider to a national list — or find one Cat-and-Dragon.com/stef/Fat/ffp.html