

Fat and Fiction



Behind the mask of eating disorders

Zandra Bell is a local comedienne and actress best known for her stage persona, the hilarious Shirley Best. In these two columns, Zandra describes how attitudes toward weight and body image have affected her personally. And 'Shirley' gets a chance to speak out, illustrating how Zandra has used humor to accept her size and shape, and deal with these 'weighty' issues.

The greatest show on girth

By SHIRLEY BEST
Special to The Sun

I, Shirley Best, am a BIG person. Yes, I am the IMAX of women.

But I refuse to feel ashamed any more! I am sick and tired of the notion that the only women who get to have fun and find romance are those little Kate Moss "scrawnabes." And you see this everywhere ... fashion magazines, travel brochures, God help us, even beer commercials. Well, I say next time look closely at these women. I'm not convinced women that perfect exist in this world and if they do ... they sure as hell aren't drinking beer.

Thanks to this brainwashing blitz of "body beautiful," we women have fallen right smack into the trap of basing our own self-worth on the acceptability of our body size. In our culture "thin" means beauty, wealth, power and popularity.

Conversely, "overweight" individuals are seen to be lazy, weak and suffering from emotional problems, even though most of them are perfectly healthy.

Their bodies are just NATURALLY that way. Like, HELLO!!! Starving yourself to death is acceptable, however, because at least you look esthetically correct on the outside as you go to your grave.

Well, as long as this fat paranoia exists, at least some people are getting rich. These days you can pay to be smeared with seaweed and then wrapped in cellophane. They encourage you to walk around for a while, looking like something off the X-Files. Then they cut the stuff off you and measure you real quick to show you your inch loss, before your flesh realizes it's free and explodes out back to normal. Sort of like cracking a package of pop 'n' fresh dough. And you just can't escape those annoying infomercials peddling the latest shape-up product, the *Thighmaster*, the *Bust Mistress*, the *Abdominizer*.

Sounds like too much S&M for me. And those grandiose promises! You, too, can have buns of steel!

Yeah right, maybe with metallic implants. But how would you explain it to airport security? If you carried your purse too close to your hips, it would probably demagnetize all your bank cards. Remember those gravity boots that Richard Gere immortalized in *American Gigolo*.

My head would explode before I could do a sit-up. You know you should change the channel, but you're mesmerized by this thing that burns calories faster than a forest fire and folds up to fit in your change purse for easy transport.

And the Malibu Barbie who is writhing

around on it just tosses her hair and smiles breathily into the camera. "Hi. I lost 25 pounds in two hours by simply breathing hard. You can use your 'magic weight-loss wizard' everywhere, while driving your car, pausing in airplane restrooms, standing in line at the supermarket checkout reading *National Enquirer*."

Like this is a plus???

Personally, I do things just to avoid having to exercise.

OK, I will admit I have been tentatively working out at the local health club.

The first month I put on 12 pounds. Now I'm a STRONG fat person. But it has opened up a whole new world for me. Incline flies, tricep kickbacks. I thought they were extinct along with the rest of the dinosaurs.

For years I thought an abdominal crunch was some high-fibre breakfast cereal.

You should always be careful when selecting a fitness facility.

I don't trust the ones with the treadmills lined up against the walls. I mean, one false move and it shoots you off. Splat! You're part of the wall hanging.

What efforts I do make, however, I do for the sheer joy of being active.

It's taken time and maturity but I have accepted the fact I have the body of an erotic fertility goddess ... trapped in an era of Calvin Klein androgyny.

Girls, grab a brain! Why are we fighting against our own bodies when we should be fighting against the stupid ideal?

Maybe we should form militant vigilante groups to burn down modeling agencies and tanning salons. We could call ourselves the 'Fat Panthers.'

Begin by learning to accept and love YOURSELF the way you are. That's when narrow-minded cultural attitudes will change. After all, the only thing that really lasts ... is polyester.

Behind the best of Shirley Best

By ZANDRA BELL
Special to The Sun

I used to play the "game." My entire weight-obsessed existence revolved around sucking in my stomach, measuring my thighs and assessing the onslaught of cellulite, because if I didn't keep an eye on the enemy, my body, every waking moment, then the inevitable horror would become reality and I would become fat. Again.

I was 10 years old when the cruel superficiality of the modern world breached my sheltered existence and changed my life.

Suddenly, it was no longer enough to be witty and intelligent. The grade school male populace had awakened to "girls" and the furtively guarded copies of big brothers' *Playboy* centre-folds specifically displayed where their bulges and bumps should be.

That's when my popularity began to wane. Yes, through the critical eyes of the world I suddenly realized I was "fat" and therefore unacceptable.

The next few years were a constant torture of mockery and humiliation.

My former friends, in an effort to be included in the right groups, starting shunning "the tub of lard"

that was the object of school derision. Now I'm sure everybody goes through "pubescent angst." You might be too scrawny or you talk funny, or you're the only one that color in your class.

As an adult I now realize there is a

difference. Prejudice against fat is not frowned upon and discouraged like other kinds. In fact, it's promoted and praised at every turn.

At 13, I realized I had to take action to psychologically survive.

That's when it began, the lengthy battle to force my body to live up to the standards laid out in *Vogue* magazine. I stopped eating.

I began exercising four hours a day. And it worked ... for a while, until I reached high school and it became increasingly difficult to maintain good grades, keep up my regime, and try to have the "slim person" social life I craved.

Eventually, at five-foot-six, I weighed 107 pounds. I was thin but I was hungry.

Shamefully, I gave in to that traitorous and base human need to nourish myself and, in order to maintain my "underweight," I became bulimic.

No one ever suspected anything was amiss. Outwardly I looked great. Even at the height of my "modelesque" beauty, I had a boyfriend confess he was falling in love with me but he was worried how his friends would react if he had a steady girlfriend with large hips. They measured 37 inches.

That's the evil joke. There was no joy in having a slim, "desirable" figure.

No matter how much weight you lose, how much exercise it takes to put you into the socially acceptable category, when you're caught competing with an unrealistic image, it's never enough.

As it states in an article compiled by Health Canada in connection with its "Vitality" program: "Particularly damaging to body image, and potentially to health, is the implicit message that this ideal can be achieved by anyone willing to work hard enough for it - an assertion that not only promotes frustration and guilt but flies in the face of genetic realities."

Thin is not healthy if you are destroying your body to achieve it. Yet little girls as young as six years old are talking about having to diet. The intolerance of body bulk is deeply ingrained and very real.

Moreover, it's still socially sanctioned, even though it's becoming literally life-threatening to its victims. And change has to begin with us.

We women have fought for years for equal rights, for our personhood in the eyes of the world. We're liberated now.

Oh, yeah? Well, wake up girls. If your self-esteem depends on the social acceptability of your body shape, you're subjugating yourselves.

