



Photo by Sara Velasquez

Gabriella's Story

Meth users take healthy steps to freedom

Alice Good '78 is an emerita communications specialist with Cooperative Extension.

I was born in a small city in Central America. On my first birthday my mom abandoned me and I grew up with my great aunt. I was a very skinny little girl. At the age of 16,

my aunt took me to Los Angeles. On the third night, the LA Police Department knocked on our door and I was taken away from the only family I knew and returned to my mother.

She told me I was fat and needed to lose weight. I was 5'1" and 119 lbs. It took me forever to get this weight and now I was once again abnormal. I was informed by my mother that in America skinny is the way to be. She bought me some pills (Dexatrim). Ever since then my weight fluctuated. I made myself throw up. It did not matter how much weight I lost, I looked in the mirror and saw fat and hated myself.

After I had a family of my own, I continued to fight an everyday battle with diet pills and

Cooperative Extension exercise physiologist Anne Lindsay (left) uses a body fat analyzer to determine the percent of body fat with a young woman in the Healthy Steps to Freedom program in Las Vegas.

binging. I started talking to my family members again who told me how they lost weight. Their miracle cure for fat was crystal meth. One of my siblings was a dealer and so I started taking it. I didn't feel anything—no euphoria. I just wasn't hungry. I didn't realize this drug was messing with my brain. It was scary.

The police came to my apartment and I was arrested.

Gabriella was taken into custody in Nevada and through assessment counseling, she was referred to Healthy Steps to Freedom, a University of Nevada Cooperative Extension program designed for women in correctional settings who find weight and energy issues to be prevalent in their drug use and treatment.

Admissions to treatment services in Nevada for substance abuse show methamphetamine (meth) as the second highest, just behind alcohol, according to a 2006 report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

“More than half the individuals in treatment for meth are women,” says Anne Lindsay, Cooperative Extension exercise physiology specialist, who has worked with this population in and out of prison settings for more than 12 years. “There is a high prevalence of eating disorders and body image disturbances among these women.”

Research indicates the primary reasons women use meth is to lose weight and gain increased energy levels. Although they sometimes lose a lot of weight during drug use, they may also experience hair and teeth loss, numerous health problems and ruined relationships with friends and family. Women often experience rapid unwanted weight gain when they stop using these drugs, and the fear of gaining even more weight can negatively impact their recovery. Knowing what effect meth had on their weight previously, the temptation to use, if only for a little while, can impact their ability to maintain sobriety in substance abuse treatment.

“We encourage these women to be more physically active and make good choices for themselves and their children,” Lindsay says. “Healthy lifestyles—nutrition, exercise and body acceptance—are taught as an alternative approach to weight loss and desire for increased energy.”


While the long-term goals of the program are to reduce drug use and increase

healthy behaviors, increasing knowledge and awareness and identifying current behavior patterns are the first objectives to reduce recidivism and attrition for females in substance abuse recovery. By reducing recidivism and the crime rate, community members also benefit from decreased financial burdens and enjoy a safer community.

Lindsay and Cooperative Extension program coordinator Sara Velasquez collaborate with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and the University of Nevada, Reno’s Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies (CASAT). CASAT is familiar with substance abuse disorders and with women who have meth issues. “CASAT is also instrumental in training substance abuse counselors, and they help us disseminate the program to counselors,” adds Lindsay.

This new direction will enable Healthy Steps to Freedom to expand its reach to northern Nevada sites where other young women like Gabriella can better understand their relationship with weight and body image with other individuals.

Today I am thankful for being here. It’s been a hard struggle going through everything, but I am currently in perfect compliance. Listening to the experiences of others made me realize what my family is going through and where I could have been. I realized I have an underlying issue that caused me to go to the lengths I did and it’s my weight.

I have learned there is a healthy, better way to deal with this issue. My mother is also realizing the damage she caused us from her ridiculing and her own twisted perception of what we should look like. I am working on getting back into the nursing field and taking care of my kids and family. I am the happiest I have been in a very long time. I still have issues with my weight but am slowly coming to grips with it. Thanks to Anne and the others at the University. 

For more information on Healthy Steps to Freedom, contact Anne Lindsay, (702) 940-5434, or lindsaya@unce.unr.edu.

Impacts of Healthy Steps to Freedom 12-week pilot program

- Weight is a primary concern for the targeted women. Preliminary results show an increased gain in knowledge about weight-related issues, while participants maintained their weight.
- Women increased 24.2 percent of their body weight (32 pounds) from the time they stopped using substances until they began the program. During the program, there was only a 2.2 percent increase (4 pounds), with no change in body fat.
- Participants had an average increase in their goal weight of 5 pounds from entry into the program to the end of the program. They learned to perceive a more realistic ideal weight for themselves, indicating increased awareness of ideal weight goals.