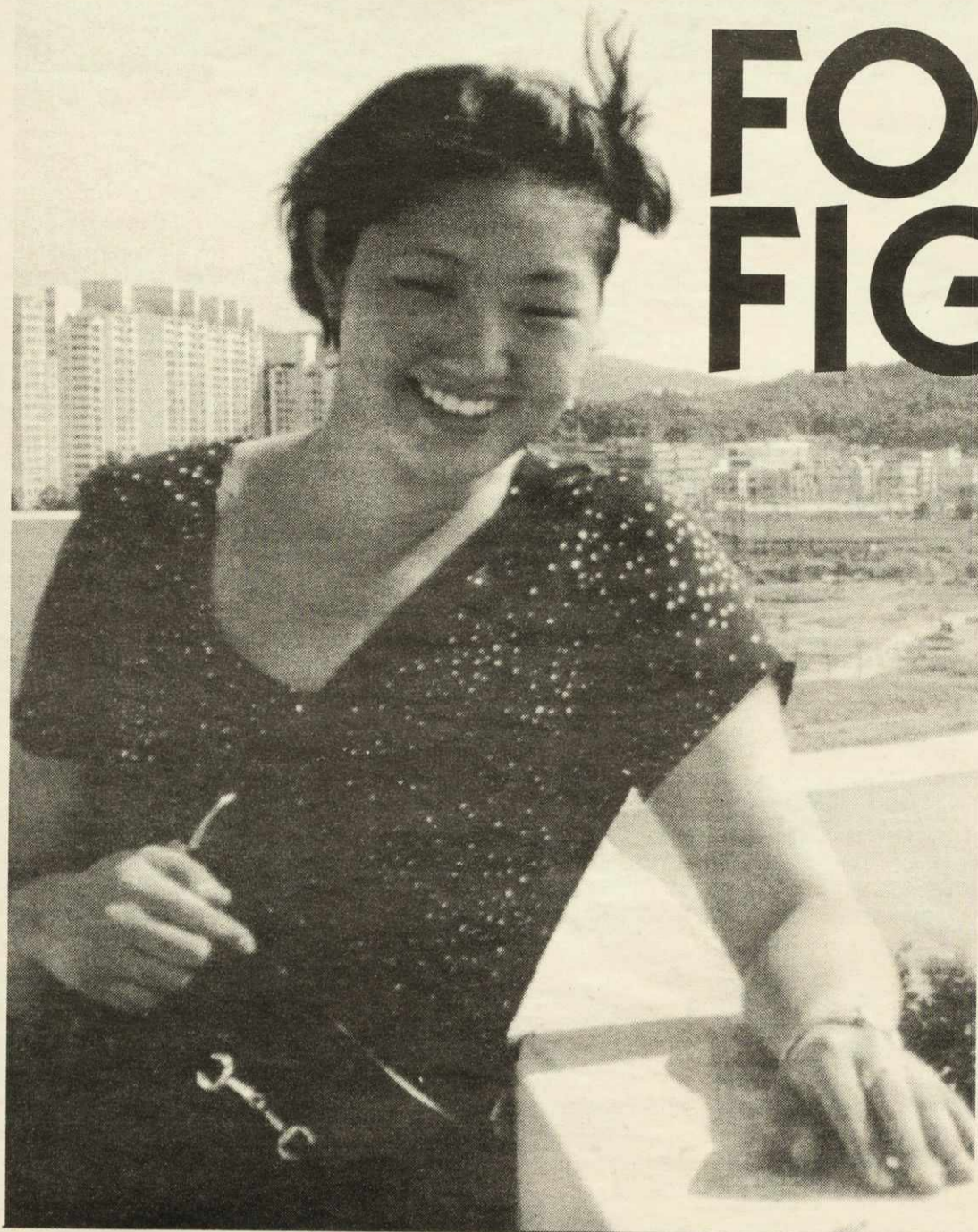


FOOD FIGHT

January 31 to February 6 is Eating Disorders Awareness Week. To shed light on an issue that affects many students, Dal student Jeanne Ju writes an account of her own struggle with an eating disorder.



BY JEANNE JU

I have been dealing with an eating disorder for the past four years. However, it has only been during the last two that I acknowledged the issue.

I was sitting in my intro-psychology class when it happened. Everyone was listening with half-hearted interest as the professor described the symptoms of anorexia nervosa and bulimia. I, however, was shocked because he was giving an exact description of me.

I too, like the examples in the text, was intensely and continually preoccupied by the fear of becoming fat and my life revolved around controlling every aspect of my life so that I wouldn't be fat.

It all began in 1995. While playing college volleyball, I tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in my knee. The injury required that I have reconstructive surgery on my ACL, which would keep me from playing. I desperately wanted to return to volleyball, but the recovery process was excruciatingly slow.

My orthopaedic surgeon explained to me how the knee has to sustain a lot of pressure from the weight of the body, which I understood. However, I wanted to do everything I could to quicken the recovery process. My solution was simple — I could reduce the pressure on my knee by losing weight. I'd be the most dedicated athlete imaginable.

Although I was injured, I trained three hours a day at the gym. I did not want to gain weight.

My volleyball coach reinforced my sensitivity to weight by encouraging my teammates to watch their weight. She would weigh the girls before and after Thanksgiving weekend, Christmas

break and reading week to monitor whether they gained weight or not. If they gained weight, the training increased.

At the time, I was so caught up in my own training that I never questioned my coach's intentions. In fact, I quite blindly agreed with her — as dedicated athletes, we should make it a priority to be fit and athletic.

And so began my days of strict dieting, although I never really called it that. I considered the low-fat food, vegetarianism, and religious exercising a *lifestyle* change. It was a permanent change that would not fade like a short-term diet.

In my eyes, I was successful

at being dedicated. I became even more perfectionistic than before — and increasingly self-critical. These characteristics were the tools that motivated me in all my endeavors. But in actuality, the perfectionism, the self-criticism, the competitiveness and over achievement fed my eating disorder.

They went unacknowledged for four years, until now.

Looking back on the past four years is painful. It is only now that I realize to what extent the eating disorder became my identity. Many of my behaviours and actions were caused by the effects of restricting myself from certain foods and being preoccupied with exercise. My high

grades began to slip because I could no longer concentrate on things anymore.

I exercised for four hours everyday. When I started running, I would run for two hours, even if it meant running on a sprained ankle.

I spent more time in the gym than I did my classes.

I felt old and alone.

The feelings of torture I put myself through were like little victories for me. I chose to do arduous things — like rowing for Dal in 1996 and tree-planting in northern Ontario during the

issues to write this article.

Despite what people may think, eating disorders are not solely about food. Eating disorders are about control and ineffectual coping mechanisms. People with eating disorders are everyday people with average-to-extraordinary abilities; people you probably know. We may not be completely emaciated like the images portrayed by the media, but we are probably just as absorbed by the eating disorder, and feel the same never-ending sense of feeling fat.

The stigma attached to eating disorders most likely causes sufferers to feel guilty, and prevents them from even getting help. To tell people you are struggling through an eating

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disorder is like 'coming out of the closet'.

Eating disorders are falsely considered as a weakness in willpower. My mother thought that if I survived the hard things that I chose to do, I could defeat the eating disorder by way of will.

Although I survived a summer of tree-planting in northern Ontario and did reasonably well, my success was largely due to the fact that I was perfectionistic and competitive, which was a result of the eating disorder.

I came back from tree-planting exhausted with life and tired of having to think about the food I chose to eat — or rather, not to eat.

Eating disorders are the 'tip of the iceberg,' so to speak. There are underlying issues which need to be resolved and attitudes that need to be changed during the process of recovery.

Once I started treatment at the Queen Elizabeth II hospital's *Eating for Life Program* at the end of August of 1998, and after I realized that there were underlying issues that were troubling me, I felt as if my problems were not at all about an eating disorder.

For me, the biggest obstacle of surviving an eating disorder is getting over the denial.

Perhaps promoting awareness about eating disorders will be a part of actually acknowledging what I've been through — and a part of my recovery.

I have learned that recovery involves not simply learning to accept different foods back into my life, but more importantly being ready to make some changes in thinking and beliefs, learning new coping mechanisms — and making a lifestyle change for the better.



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