

A Hidden Reflection: Visibility from the Invisible



Confronting the psychological and fundamental barriers of obesity through a reflection of oneself.

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Hector Garcia Jr. sat in his new oversized leather recliner as his niece Chelsea Amen delivered a plate of food to him on Thanksgiving. After years of repeatedly gaining and losing hundreds of pounds, Garcia, who at one point weighed 636 pounds, once again was stuck in the back bedroom of his parents' modest South Side house.

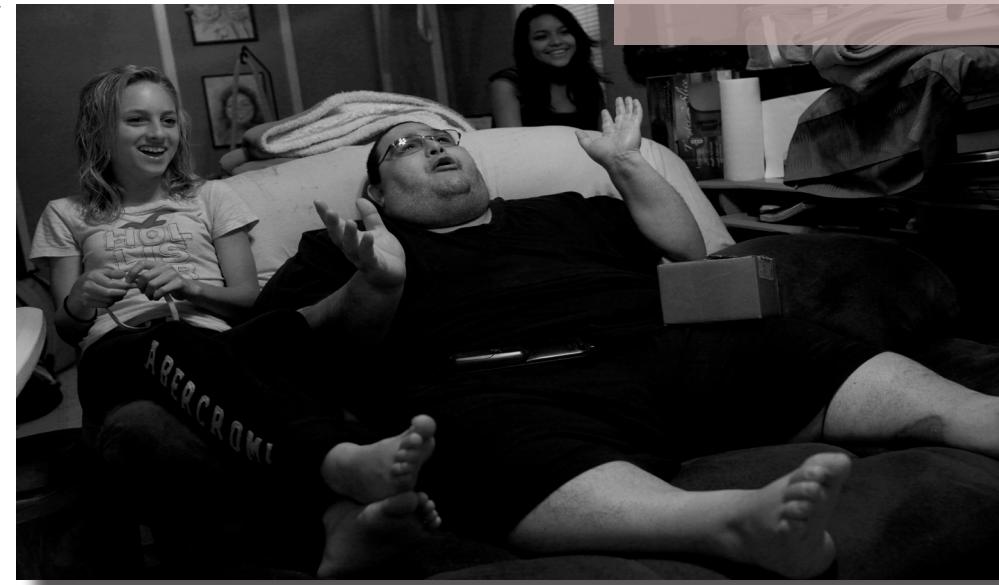
While his family ate together in the small living and dining rooms decorated with crosses and photos, Garcia couldn't get up to join them. From his chair, he picked up a flyswatter to engage in a playful sword fight with his 6-year-old nephew, Brandon Garcia, who wielded a back scratcher.

Two more of his teenage nieces came in later. Brooke Freed, perched as usual on the armchair of his recliner, used Garcia's laptop to show him the boots she wanted for Christmas, while Lauren Ibarra settled in for a nap on her uncle's bariatric hospital bed. This is Garcia's childhood home, but as a child he never imagined that for years obesity would confine him to just one room and leave him unable to walk more than a few feet without resting, too big to get into a car, isolated from everyday life, and afraid of falling and possibly suffocating.

Instead, as a little boy he dreamed of being a fighter pilot and even forced himself to watch movies of pilots spinning so he could train himself to not get sick. In front of the television in his bedroom, four miniature fighter planes line the table, symbols of the many hopes lost in Garcia's lifelong fight with obesity.

Most of all, he wanted to be married and have children — another wish unfulfilled.

"It's hard to fight for my life when I feel that my life is not a life. It's existence. "It's hard to fight for my life when I feel that my life is not a life. It's existence. Existence is not enough for me,"



Hector Garcia Jr. laughs with his nieces, Brooke Freed, left, and Lauren Ibarra in February 2011. They would navigate to him, like a magnet, Hector's mother, Elena, said.

he said. "I don't remember a time when I was truly happy. I remember happy moments with family, enjoyable moments, but never truly happy. And I don't know that I'll ever find that and I've come to terms with that, that is what my life will be. The remainder of my life will be lonely, an existence, that's just solitary. And I hope it's not, because God gave me a big heart."

Garcia's story is a familiar one, though an extreme example, even in Bexar County, where almost two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese. His weight put him in a category known as severely obese, which makes up about 6.3 percent of the U.S. population. The rate of severe obesity is growing even faster than the rate of people who are merely overweight — 33 percent — or obese — 36 percent.

Neither the state nor local health agencies track the percentage of people with severe obesity, which is more dangerous than lesser degrees of obesity because it raises the likelihood of dying prematurely — one recent study suggests 14 years early — from heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

An untold number of people with severe obesity live in isolation like Garcia,

unable to find or access the medical and psychological help they need to combat its pervasive effects. Chubby as a child, Garcia was picked on and ridiculed. He began dieting in high school but always regained the weight he had lost and more.

By his mid-30s, when he reached his peak weight, he had gastric bypass surgery and lost nearly 400 pounds but gradually regained it. With both knees so damaged by his weight that he barely could move, Garcia mustered the determination to shed about 350 pounds again, this time through dieting and exercise, in order to have double knee replacement surgery when he was 46.

In the two years since then, as his weight approached 600 pounds yet again, Garcia's body became as much a mental prison as a physical one.

To save others from the same pain and alienation, Garcia allowed a San Antonio Express-News photographer to follow him for the past four years to see close up the toll obesity takes.

"My life is a cautionary tale," he said. Three weeks ago, Garcia strained to lift himself out of his recliner and walk the 40 feet to the front door where his mother stood outside waiting. "Mom, I can't breathe," he gasped as he collapsed in a living room chair.

Feeling left out

By the time he was 5 or 6, Hector realized he stood out because of his weight. He wasn't obese yet, but he was the kid wearing the husky jeans from Sears.

His mother, Elena Garcia, was 14 when she married Hector Garcia, and together they had six children. Hector Jr. was the fourth.

"My mother was a child having children," Garcia said of his childhood. "She didn't know what she was doing. She gave us what she had. We were poor, we didn't have money." His mother had to learn how to make food stretch, and the family ate the cheapest food available: Beans, rice, vermicelli, Kool-Aid, food cooked with lard.

"I didn't know anything about nutrition," Elena said.

If someone offered her a salad, she'd say she wasn't a rabbit.

"So we picked up bad eating habits, not because we wanted to but because that's the only thing we could eat," Garcia said.

His parents and his siblings are overweight or obese. Terry, the sister Garcia was closest to, also underwent gastric bypass surgery. She later died of stomach cancer.

Garcia was laughed at by other children and was the last to be picked for sports teams, a stigma that persisted his whole life. He got into frequent fights with classmates in a drainage ditch near his home because "they all wanted to fight the fat kid." He remembers being called "fatso" and "tubby."

"They even called me 'hamburger.' I became an outcast. Kids just didn't want to hang out with me. They always pushed me to the side,"



Hector Garcia Jr. rests after walking laps for the first time at the Palo Alto College Aquatic Center pool in May 2011. Garcia could walk in the water with less pain and began an exercise routine based on walking laps in the pool.

"My Life is a Cautionary Tale"

- Hector Garcia Jr.

Garcia said. "I always felt from a very young age that I wasn't worthy or I wasn't good enough, and that's something that's carried on to my adulthood." Recalling the humiliation and isolation he suffered still brought him pain 40 years later.

"I always pictured myself as a child with my head up against glass looking at life happening and I was stuck behind the glass. Because no one, no one wanted the fat kid," he said, crying.

Complex problem

Garcia said people would dismiss him as lazy



Hector Garcia Jr. teases his mother and caretaker, Elena Garcia, as he shoots baskets at the Westside Family YMCA in September 2011.

or gluttonous, but the mainstream medical community — including the American Medical Association — has come to recognize obesity not as a moral failing but as a chronic

disease influenced by genetic, physiological, psychological and environmental factors.

"Personal responsibility is only half the equation," said Dr. Ruth Berggren, director of the Center for Medical Humanities & Ethics at the University of Texas Health Science Center.

One factor contributing to the obesity epidemic is what some experts call a toxic food environment: oversized restaurant portions, easy access to junk food, the prevalence of drive-throughs, 24/7 marketing of unhealthy foods and a culture that celebrates such high-calorie foods as deep-fried butter.

While some experts blame an excess of calories, other obesity researchers believe eating certain foods — such as refined carbohydrates and high-fructose corn syrup — affects insulin levels and throws the metabolism out of whack, contributing to a disease that can't be cured simply by putting down the fork and going for a run, said Dr. Brian Sabowitz, medical director of Alamo City Medical Weight Loss. Then there's the sedentary lifestyle that has become the norm

for most Americans: a reliance on cars, computers, TVs and smartphones that make life easier but also make it easier to gain weight. Genetics also is a culprit in obesity. The working concept, said Dr. John Pilcher, a bariatric surgeon at New Dimensions Weight Loss, is that some people are lucky with their genes, making them less susceptible to an environment that promotes obesity. Others aren't so lucky. Garcia likely had a genetic predisposition to obesity, said Thomas Wadden, a psychologist and director of the Center for Weight and Eating Disorders at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, who did not treat Garcia.

"He came into the world with the cards stacked against him," Wadden said. "If you had taken the same individual and placed him in Afghanistan or Iraq, he probably would have been one of the heavier individuals in those countries, but they just don't have the food supply, they don't have the multibillion-dollar marketing campaigns that would have led him to weigh 500 pounds."

The mix of toxic food environment and sedentary lifestyle has been pernicious and pervasive in the nation since the 1960s, Wadden said, and two-thirds of the population have succumbed to it. People with genetic predisposition are the most adversely affected. "America will let you achieve your most obese potential," he said.

Food as comfort

. It wasn't just children who ostracized Garcia. Even as an adult, he felt like a social outcast. Strangers would make faces at him in public. Women saw him as a friend, not boyfriend material.



Hector Garcia Jr.'s nieces, Jordan Garcia, from left, Brooke Freed and Lauren Ibarra, pay him a visit as he recovers from knee replacement surgery in July 2012.

Once, he said, a potential employer took one look at him, balled up his job application and threw it in the trash.

The prejudice against people who are obese is the only one that remains socially acceptable, he said. "You can say something about a fat person, no one's going to object," he said. "You say something about a person of color or someone who's gay or something, they're on you like stink on a bug. You'd think that as enlightened as we are in this world today, that things would change, but they really don't."



Elena Garcia breaks down as she tells the story of her son, Hector Garcia Jr. collapsing and her efforts to revive him the night before in their living room on Dec. 9, 2014.

The more Garcia was rejected, the more lonely he became and the more he turned to eating. He felt like food was a friend.

"Food didn't mistreat me, food never told me anything, never said anything bad to me, so I took comfort in eating," he said. "And I was making the problem worse." Garcia said he didn't realize the damage he was doing until he was an adult. By then, overeating had become a way of life.

"I didn't know how else to feel a sense of happiness other than to eat. And I was destroying myself and I just didn't know it," he said. "Even though the act of eating was enjoyable, the result was incredibly disastrous for me, and it made me unhappy."

To Garcia, food was an addiction, one that he thought can have an even stronger pull than other substances. While it's possible to live without alcohol or illegal drugs, it's not possible to live without food.

"Unfortunately, I can't stop cold turkey," he said.

"That's what makes it so hard, that you can never stop eating." The mental health aspect of overeating often goes unrecognized, said Susan C. Mengden, co-executive director of the Eating Disorder Center of San Antonio partnering with Eating Recovery Center. "Eating for comfort, overeating consistently, is something that could be a mental illness," said Mengden, who did not treat Garcia. "It could be an eating disorder."

Some people turn to eating as a "very comforting, nurturing, relaxing, coping mechanism," she said. Binge eating, which can lead to obesity, was recently recognized as an eating disorder by mental health professionals, as are anorexia and bulimia.

Mengden said up to 30 percent of patients seeking weight-loss treatments could fit the criteria for binge-eating disorder.

The real Hector

While the world saw Garcia as "the fat guy,"

his family and friends knew the real Hector. He was a man of faith who earned his bachelor's degree in Bible ministry and was an active member of the Bandera Road City Church, continuing to tithe even after he was unable to leave his home to attend services.

He was a writer and a poet who poured his feelings into words on a page. When the family sent greeting cards for birthdays or holidays, he was the one to sign them with a thoughtful message. He wrote several chapters of a memoir about life with obesity that he titled "Life Behind the Glass."

In 2008, he published a children's book, "Ronnie the Rhino and the Grumpy Old Elephant," about a rhinoceros treated differently because his horn was in the wrong place — a character who symbolized Hector himself. He loved sports, especially the Dallas Cowboys, the San Antonio Spurs and the Texas Longhorns. He liked cars and enjoyed watching Formula 1 racing.

Family was the most important thing in his life. Garcia loved his nieces and nephew like the children he always wanted. He helped raise Chelsea as a baby.

He taught Lauren how to drive. As teens, his nieces confided in their uncle about boyfriends and school. They turned to him for advice, solace, consolation and humor. When he was confined to his bedroom, his nieces would run to him like he was a magnet, and they spoke on the phone frequently.

"Hector showed us the good in ourselves when we could not see it," Chelsea said. "He reminded people of their worth. He reminded people that they had a place and that they had purpose, not just in the eyes of God, but in his own heart."

Life with limitations

Even as Garcia's weight ballooned, he lived independently and held several jobs, including one at a meat company when he weighed over 600 pounds. He recalled hanging on the meat scales. "They went up to 1,000 pounds," he said. "That's how I know what my weight was, too. A normal scale's not going to weigh you."

Hector Garcia Jr.'s siblings Rebecca Freed, with her husband, Tom Freed, from left, John Garcia, Laura Garcia and their mother, Elena Garcia, make plans Dec. 10, 2014 for the private viewing and public memorial service for Hector at Trevino Funeral Home Palo Alto.

