

# My own unique colours

## A patient's winning battle with negative body image

### How self-acceptance and exercise changed a patient's life

By Gisele DeVarenes

#### Introduction

Having Klippel Trenaunay Syndrome (KTS), a vascular malformation, and lymphedema in my right leg, I have struggled with my body image for most of my life. When I listened to Alessia Cara's song "Scars To Your Beautiful" for the first time, tears rolled down my face. It struck a chord deep inside me. The lyrics that moved me the most are: "...Oh, she don't see the light that's shining...Deeper than the eyes can find it...Maybe we have made her blind... So she tries to cover up her pain..."



**Gisele DeVarenes** is a 48-year-old proud mom residing in Dieppe, New Brunswick and working as a Federal Public Servant. She enjoys being active, baking, knitting, reading and most importantly spending time with loved ones. She enjoys sharing her journey with others whenever she gets the opportunity.

I have covered my pain in many different ways over the years; I wore baggy clothes, so no one could see my right leg and to avoid those weird looks. I stayed away from doing things that could possibly show my leg such as wearing shorts, skirts or beachwear, sports, and even dating. I used food to hide my pain... I struggled with my weight and at one point in my life, I was morbidly obese. I never talked about it and I especially didn't want anyone touching my right leg. If I did talk about it, it was to use it as an excuse to not do something. I had built so many walls and barriers that I was existing, not living. I was negative, angry, and resentful. It consumed my life.

Luckily for me, life would give me an opportunity to change. Just like caterpillar, I would start coming out of my cocoon to discover my own unique colors. I was 41 when I got the opportunity to experience life coaching with Jim Grant. My vision, my beliefs and my thoughts would all be challenged. I realized that underneath all the negativity, anger and resentment, was a woman full of love, life, dreams and goals. I started seeing myself differently, which changed my way of thinking. I started being happier; I was a better version of myself.



**Fitness coach, Cam MacKinnon.**

I'm forever grateful for this challenging, but rewarding journey.

Training under the supervision of my fitness coach, Cam MacKinnon for the last six years was another golden opportunity. He would believe in me at a time when I didn't even believe in myself. He would teach me to set goals, work hard, and achieve those goals. I had many preconceived limits on what I was capable of doing fitness wise. He showed me that I was capable of doing so much more than I had ever dreamed possible. He challenged me over and over and over (and still does today) and I would not have it any other way.

With hard work, determination, commitment and consistency, the results came to fruition. My favorite example: I could barely do a 6" step-up when I started, and now I can do 21" step-ups. As I got fitter, I started losing weight and feeling better about myself, which overflowed into my everyday life both physically and mentally. There is no other place that I feel stronger both inside and out than while training with Cam. He has been a major influence in my life and I'm grateful for his guidance and faith in me.

Another huge life changing moment was learning that lymphedema could be managed. I am blessed to have an amazing certified lymphedema therapist locally.

Sophie Doiron has been amazing, and she has given me so much that words come short on how thankful I am.

I went through the initial Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) which drastically brought the swelling down. I felt a certain sense of normality and empowerment. It was life changing. I have maintained these results by regularly exercising,



wearing my compression garments, taking care of my skin, doing lymphatic drainage massages and becoming leaner. I am proud of the 80 pounds lost so far and I am working on attaining my goal weight. It is not easy but giving up is not an

option. It is key to managing my conditions.

I am surrounded by amazing friends and family. When I decided to start changing, they embarked on this journey with me.

They showered me with love and support. I could not have done it without them. They have listened to me, given me a shoulder to cry on, celebrated with me, laughed with me and stood beside me through all these changes. I am living my life to the fullest. I am happier than I have ever been. I refuse to hide anymore. Life is too

short. Not everyone is comfortable with my leg and I still get weird looks. The difference is—I'm not as angry anymore.

I don't let it consume me or stop me from doing things. I let the tears flow when they

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need to, wipe them dry and continue on my journey. Instead of considering myself a freak, I consider myself unique. A unique piece of artwork is priceless, and so am I.

Do I have it all figured out today? No, but I have come a long way. I am proud of myself and I am celebrating the journey that I have travelled. I will continue to work hard towards becoming the beautiful, unique butterfly I was always meant to be. Someone who is very near and dear to my heart keeps repeating the following: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Small changes turn into amazing transformation over time. 



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