

# DIFFERENT LIKE YOU

Meet teens whose unique experiences might make them seem as if they're from another world—when in reality they're just like you.



It's OK to be different. Kids used to tease me because I'm not exactly like them, but I think being different is a good thing.



Here I am with Mr. Wettrick. Once he started helping me, I felt hopeful again.

## Eric Is Getting Healthy

Eric, 15, has struggled with his weight his whole life. But a teacher has inspired him to change his mind-set *and* his habits.

It's been four years since my dad died. I still miss him every single day.

BY ERIC EKIS,  
AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

I wish you could have met my dad. He was awesome. I remember one time when I was in elementary school, I overslept and missed a school field trip. Instead of getting mad, my dad took me to work with him and taught me how to install satellite dishes. How cool is that? We were really close.

Then came 2010—the worst year of my life. One day that spring, my dad complained of a severe headache, completely out of the blue. My mom, my brother Jon, my sister Taryn, and I didn't think much of it, but two days later, my mom picked us up from school and broke down crying. Then she told us the saddest news I had ever heard: My dad had died of a brain aneurysm.

That's when my whole world

started to fall apart. I had been heavy my entire life, but during that time following my dad's death, I gained an unusual amount of weight. I was devastated, and I missed my dad terribly. I ate nothing but comfort foods—fat, sugar, and salt were the only things that made me feel good.

I got so big that kids in my fifth- and sixth-grade classes that year would call me names that were so mean, I can't even repeat them. It made me feel horrible. I'd get so

angry that I'd either walk away or confront them and say, "You don't know what I've been through."

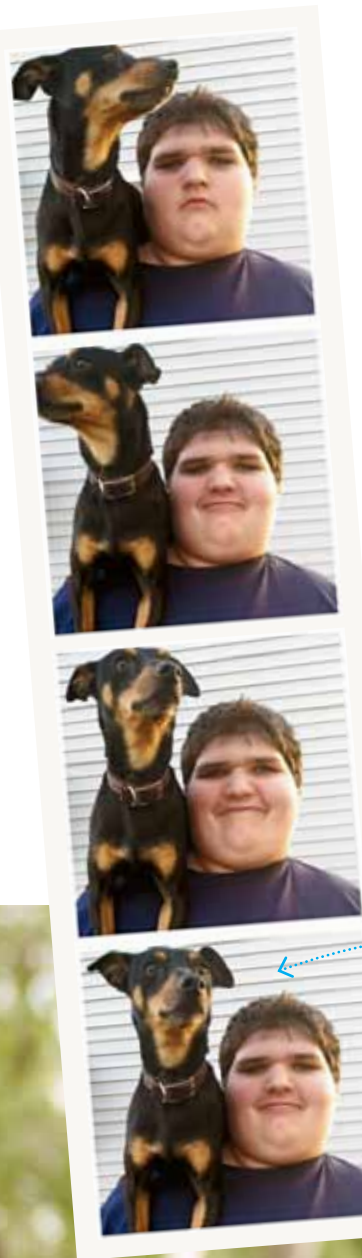
I even approached my principal and reported the bullying, but he said it wasn't his problem and he couldn't do anything about it. I felt so incredibly helpless. As if things couldn't get any worse, toward the end of that year, I slipped, fell, and broke my leg. It was such a severe break that I couldn't walk for months. Again, I turned to food for comfort.



ALAN INGRAM FOR CHOICES (ALL PHOTOS)







## LIFE-CHANGING OFFER

Fast-forward to the fall of 2013, which is when I started my freshman year of high school. During the first week of school, I accidentally broke a desk in my broadcast journalism class just by sitting on it. My teacher, Mr. Wettrick, came over to me in the hallway, and instead of making me feel embarrassed, he offered to help. He said, "I'm trying to lose a few pounds. Why don't you come in before class tomorrow morning and exercise with me?"

I had mixed emotions. On the one hand, I was excited, because I wanted to change. But I was also nervous, because I barely knew

him. So I explained that I didn't have a ride and brushed him off.

But Mr. Wettrick wouldn't take no for an answer. About a month later, he approached me again in the hallway and asked me what was wrong. I said, "I don't care." He said, "About what?" I said, "About anything." He said, "When did you give up?" I said, "When my dad died." Then I told him all about my father, and we both started crying.

I had never opened up to anyone like that before. There was something about Mr. Wettrick that was different from most teachers—he was nice, energetic, and funny. He said, "We're going to do something about this. I have an idea."

My dog Vader is a rat terrier. He's the best pet ever!



I thought I didn't like tomatoes, but they're really good! I put them on all of my sandwiches now.



Kevin was like my coach, keeping me motivated to move.

I also love tae kwon do. It's good exercise.



## SLIMMING DOWN

Mr. Wettrick devised an amazing plan. He taught a class that allowed students to take on special projects. One of his students, Kevin, who was a popular senior, took me on—his goal was to help me learn how to exercise and eat nutritious foods. Kevin and I started walking every day through the school hallways during first period for about 45 minutes. Sometimes Mr. Wettrick and other students would walk with us.

At first, walking for that long was difficult, because outside of P.E. class, I had never worked out before. But as the days went on, it gradually became easier. While we walked, we talked about life, which felt great. I could vent about whatever was bothering me.

I also met with a dietitian, who taught me how to ditch fast food and soda, cut portions at each meal

in half, and start eating fruits and vegetables and drinking water.

It's crazy how much this support changed my life. It still hits me hard that my dad is gone, but I don't feel as sad as I used to. Over the school year, I dropped from 520 pounds to 502 pounds. I know it doesn't seem like a lot, but after gaining so much weight so **steadily**, it's definitely a huge step in the right direction. And now I'm determined to stick with my program. My goal is to hit 230 pounds by the time I graduate from high school.

But losing weight isn't my only goal. I want to take care of myself and maintain a healthy lifestyle to feel good—both inside and out. I'm confident that I'll stay on track, because Mr. Wettrick taught me something that's even more powerful than broadcast journalism—how to believe in myself. •

## 3 Things Eric Wants You to Know

**1 DONT PASS JUDGMENT.** You can't walk up to someone and expect that person's home life to be the same as yours. You never know what another person is going through until you get to know him or her.

**2 SHOW COMPASSION.** If you see someone who is struggling with something, make the person feel like you care—like you're a sibling or best friend. Ask the person what's wrong and how you can help.

**3 FIND SUPPORT.** When you're going through something difficult, there are people who will pick you up. Trust the friends and family you know will be there for you for a long time.