

Proud to be fat: the Big Beautiful Women

Photos: Frédéric Neema/ Gamma

San Francisco, CA, USA

In a society that is obsessed with losing weight by any means, some fat women have decided to take the complete opposite approach and proudly accept their bodies.

They are joining a growing number of women under the pro-fat acceptance movement that promotes body-acceptance and fitness at any size. These women feel no shame in describing themselves as fat or big and participate in activities that would leave a lot of thinner ladies exhausted.

Some of these women are based in the San Francisco Bay Area and have taken the lead in the pro-fat or size acceptance movement and created various fitness and artistic groups that demonstrate their beliefs. Their activities range from fitness training to burlesque shows and from hip-hop dancing to synchronized swimming.

Among these women, Marilyn Wann, Marina Wolf, Heather MacAllister, Shirley Sheffield et Jennifer Portnick are five Beautiful Big Women (BBW) who are leaders in this movement and try to change the way society perceives fat people.

Some women are just fat by nature, no matter how little they eat or how much they exercise. Some of them have tried all types of diets and exercise until they finally accepted the idea that they do not need to look like what society promotes in its media cultures.

While the majority of contemporary fashion magazines promotes sizes that are closer to anorexia than the average weight, these women see more sensuality and sexual appeal in their forms than the bones appearing through the skin of most fashion models.

Their goal is to promote the fact that you can be fat and beautiful, big and attractive, above the “average” weight and physically fit.

The movement is nation-wide but its core seems to be in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is represented by the NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, a non-profit human rights organization founded in 1969 and dedicated to improving the quality of life for fat people, men and women. NAAFA is the only national membership organization that fights to eliminate discrimination based on body size. It provides fat people with the tools for self-empowerment through public education, advocacy, and member support. They have local chapters all over the USA as well as in Canada and Europe.

They believe that stable weight and concentrating on personal fitness rather than thinness may be the healthiest way to deal with the propensity to be fat. They find that identifying themselves as “fat”, a term which usually has a derogatory meaning, is an important step in casting off the shame some have been taught to feel about their own bodies.

According to NAAFA, an estimated 38 million Americans are significantly heavier than average and face societal and institutional bias because of their size. Fat people are discriminated against in employment, education, access to public accommodations, and access to adequate medical care. In addition, fat people are stigmatized, and are the victims of tasteless jokes and assaults on their dignity. They claim that despite evidence that 95-98% of diets fail over three years, thin-obsessed societies continue to believe that fat people are at fault for their size.

Marilyn Wann, 36, is author of the book, *"FAT!SO? -- Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!"* In the 1990s, she created an underground zine by the same name. She is a diversity trainer on weight issues, speaking frequently on college campuses and in the corporate setting. In 2000, her fat rights activism was instrumental in obtaining passage of a height/weight anti-discrimination law in San Francisco, California -- only the fourth U.S. jurisdiction to offer such legal protection. She has performed as a synchronized swimmer with the Padded Lilies, as a hip hop dancer in the Phat Fly Girls, as a modern dancer in the Big Moves dance series, and as a burlesque dancer with Ms. DeMeanor's Big Bottom Revue. Marilyn is 36 years old and lives in San Francisco, California.

Marina Wolf, 33, is founder and director of Big Moves, the only service organization in the world dedicated to promoting size diversity in dance. She teaches hip hop to dancers of all sizes, and is the artistic director of the Phat Fly Girls, a hip hop performing ensemble with full-bodied flavor. Through Big Moves, Marina produced Bodies in Motion, an annual professional dance concert featuring larger dancers, and the San Francisco productions of the Original Fat-Bottom Revue, the nation's only all-fat burlesque troupe. She is also the editor of Momentum, "a journal of size-diverse dance and movement." Marina's vision is that “one day dancers will be appreciated for the scope of their talents, not the size of their leotards”

Heather MacAllister is the founder of the Venus Group, a social and support network for large women, and is also known as Ms. DeMeanor, founder of Big Burlesque/Ms. DeMeanor's Fat-Bottom Revue, a performance group of fat artist/activists. She has conducted size acceptance workshops and/or performances nationwide.

Jennifer Portnick, 38, might be a fat aerobics instructor but she is definitely fit. Portnick, who weighs 240 pounds (108 kgs) and measures 5 feet 8 (176 cms), has been doing high-impact aerobics for 15 years and follows a diet that is mostly vegetarian. She is certified by the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America and teaches several high-

energy, low-impact classes a week. She has her own program called “Feeling Good Fitness”. Her regular job is as a computer systems training manager. Because her application to become a franchised instructor was refused by dance-fitness giant Jazzercise Inc., Portnick filed a discrimination complaint with the San Francisco’s Human Rights Commission under the city’s "fat and short" law, which bans discrimination on the basis of weight and height. The two parties ended up by reaching an agreement and Jazzercise agreed to drop its requirement that its instructors must look fit. "I wanted to be judged on my merits, not on my measurements," says Portnick.

Shirley Sheffield has been a size activist by attitude all her life—wearing a swimsuit with pride for as long as she can remember-- and in an organized fashion for the past seven years. She's a writer and actor with FAT LIP Reader's Theatre; a founding member of the Padded Lilies, a fat women's synchronized swim team which has appeared on a number of television programs; past President of the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance)(1997-99); occasional spokesperson for the fat acceptance movement; contributor to fat-related publications. She runs her own business working as an editor and consultant to clients in various fields.
