



Photos by Bryce Harper

A year ago, Sonny Willis became the first person to pass through the weight loss surgery program at St. David's in Round Rock. Since the surgery, he's worked out like a fiend, lost nearly 100 pounds and now he feels . . .

1,000% DIFFERENT

By RACHEL SLADE

There was a time when Sonny Willis was only leaving his couch to use the bathroom; his weight and an aggressive case of gout made moving difficult and painful, so he worked, ate and slept in the family room. Just over a year — and nearly 100 pounds — later, the 59-year-old Round Rock man feels “1,000 percent different” thanks to a program and surgery he credits with saving his life.

Mr. Willis, a systems engineer for Oracle and father of three, used to maintain an active lifestyle, but between his sedentary job and growing older, regular workouts had fallen by the wayside and he'd begun packing on the pounds.

In 2003 when he began feeling pain in his joints, doctors chalked it up to arthritis flares and started him on meds. But he would go for weeks at a time when it was too painful to even walk, and half a year passed before he was diagnosed with gout. The damage, however, had already been done, and it seemed as though a new medication was added to his daily regimen at each doctor's visit.

“It got to the point where I just continued to gain the weight, I wasn't active and I was realizing I wasn't 25 anymore. I thought ‘wow, is this what my life is going to be?’ he said. “One day I thought ‘really, in not long, I'm gonna be dead.’”

Mr. Willis, who used to avoid taking meds of any kind, had worked up to a “mind bogging” 11 different prescriptions, including six for hypertension.

And then fate stepped in.

“One day I was sitting in this waiting room for a while and it had a body mass index chart up on the wall,” he said. “I knew I was heavy, but I realized I was 100 pounds overweight. I got home and had this revelation: ‘this is really stupid to have all these problems and take all these medications.’”

Determined to find relief, he began investigating his options and became the first patient to pass through the formal weight loss surgery program at St. David's Round Rock Medical Center in April of 2008, when program founder Andy Hawthorne placed a lap-band system around the upper portion of his stomach.

The surgeries — gastric bypass, lap-band and more recently the gastric sleeve — have gained popularity over the last four decades, and more



Fifty-nine-year-old Sonny Willis underwent lap band surgery on April 10. Since then, he has lost about 100 pounds with the help of a healthy diet and vigorous exercise.

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SURGERY

25 have undergone procedure at Round Rock facility

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than 150 people have attended St. David's program seminars since their start last spring. Of those, about 25 have undergone surgery, and Dr. Hawthorne estimates about 20 are currently working through the program and with their insurance companies awaiting surgery. While the cosmetic side of losing weight is a perk, the St. David's Round Rock program is primarily focused on eliminating the adverse affects of an overweight body.

"I like to say 'most primary care physicians can't offer a cure for diabetes or hypertension, but I can,'" he said. "A weight loss surgery like this can."

He and his partner Dr. Brady Anderson — a friend from residency — pride themselves on a "picky" process that sends candidates through a seminar and consultations with dietitians, psychologists and surgeons before approval for surgery.

"Being a new program and a new market, we wanted to have good results," Dr. Haw-

thorne said. "The better the patient education, the more thorough, the harder it is to fall through the cracks."

With education comes an understanding that none of the surgeries are an immediate fix, and all of them require major commitment on the part of the patient.

"This decision involves changing," Mr. Willis said. "Whether it's health, hunger, inactivity — whatever it is, it has to change."

Dr. Hawthorne wishes every patient were as perfect a candidate as Mr. Willis, who has cut his prescriptions down to one for gout and one for blood pressure, and was so eager to get his life back on track

that at one time he built up to running 12 miles a day on his treadmill.

"I feel so much more energetic, so much more focused," Mr. Willis said. "I feel great, I feel healthy and I look forward to extending my life."

Ninety-two pounds later, the two men joke that Mr. Willis' muscles are bigger than Dr. Hawthorne's, and Mr. Willis has embraced his renewed life.

"I've found I actually like the healthy stuff," he said. "I have an absolute Jones for sugar free popsicles."

He credits his doctors for giving him activity, life and hope back. And while they've been right about nearly every-

thing he'd go through to make it to where he is today, he's proud to say they were wrong about one.

"I asked Dr. [John] Hall if I'd ever be off my blood pressure medication and he said 'no way, you'll be taking that the rest of your life,'" Mr. Willis said. "But I'm down to a single half-dose ... and if my blood pressure stays where it is, six months from now I'll be off — I can live with that kind of mistake."

Dr. Hawthorne's next seminar is from 6 to 7:30 p.m. on Monday, June 22 in St. David's Round Rock Medical Center's education classrooms one and two. To RSVP or for more information, call 512-478-3627.