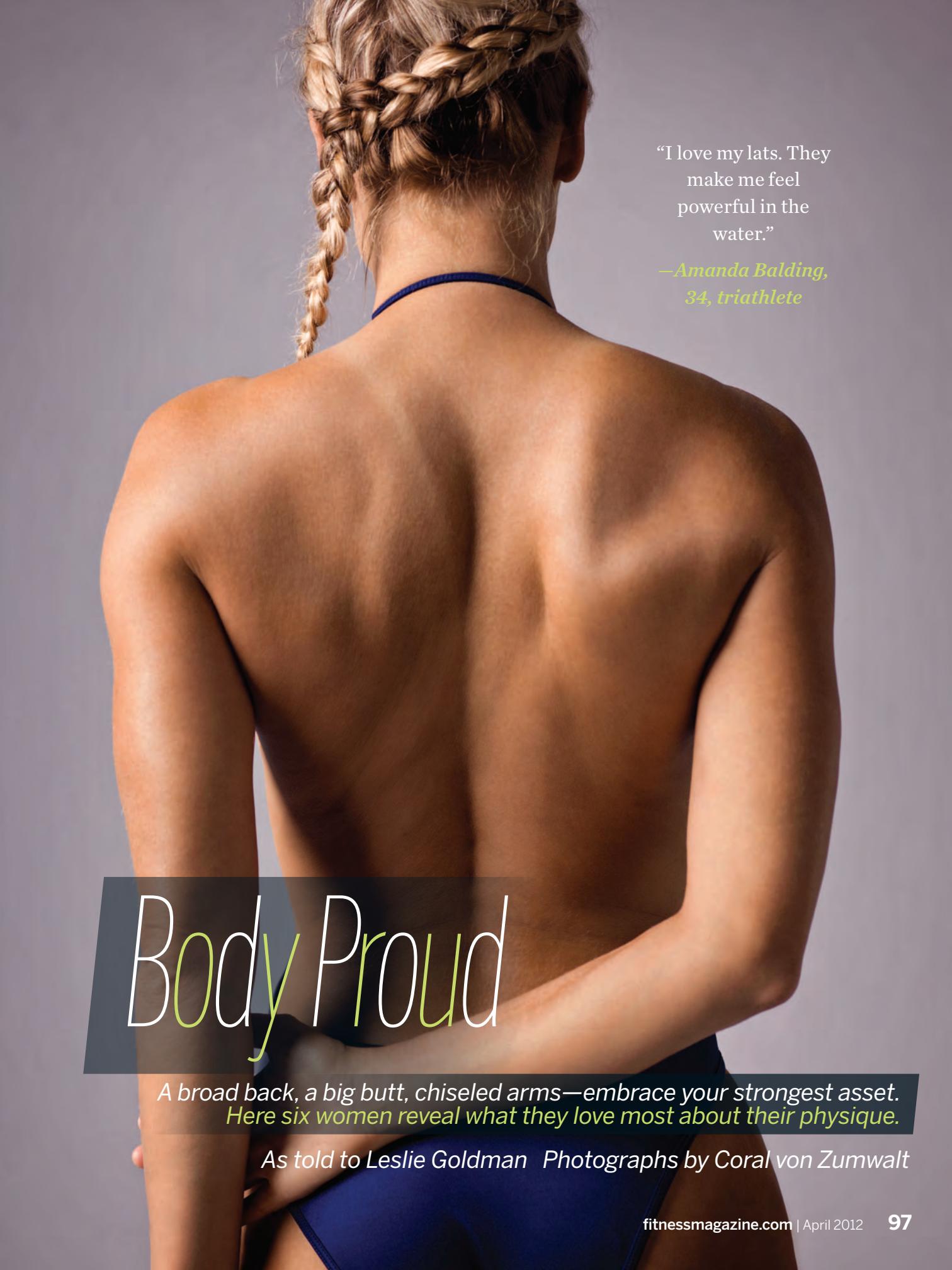


live healthy :

“Taking care of
200 horses keeps my
abs flat and strong.
No gym workout gives
me the same
satisfaction—or
results.”

—*Haley Didier,*
24, assistant ranch
manager



“I love my lats. They
make me feel
powerful in the
water.”

—*Amanda Balding,*
34, triathlete

Body Proud

A broad back, a big butt, chiseled arms—embrace your strongest asset.
Here six women reveal what they love most about their physique.

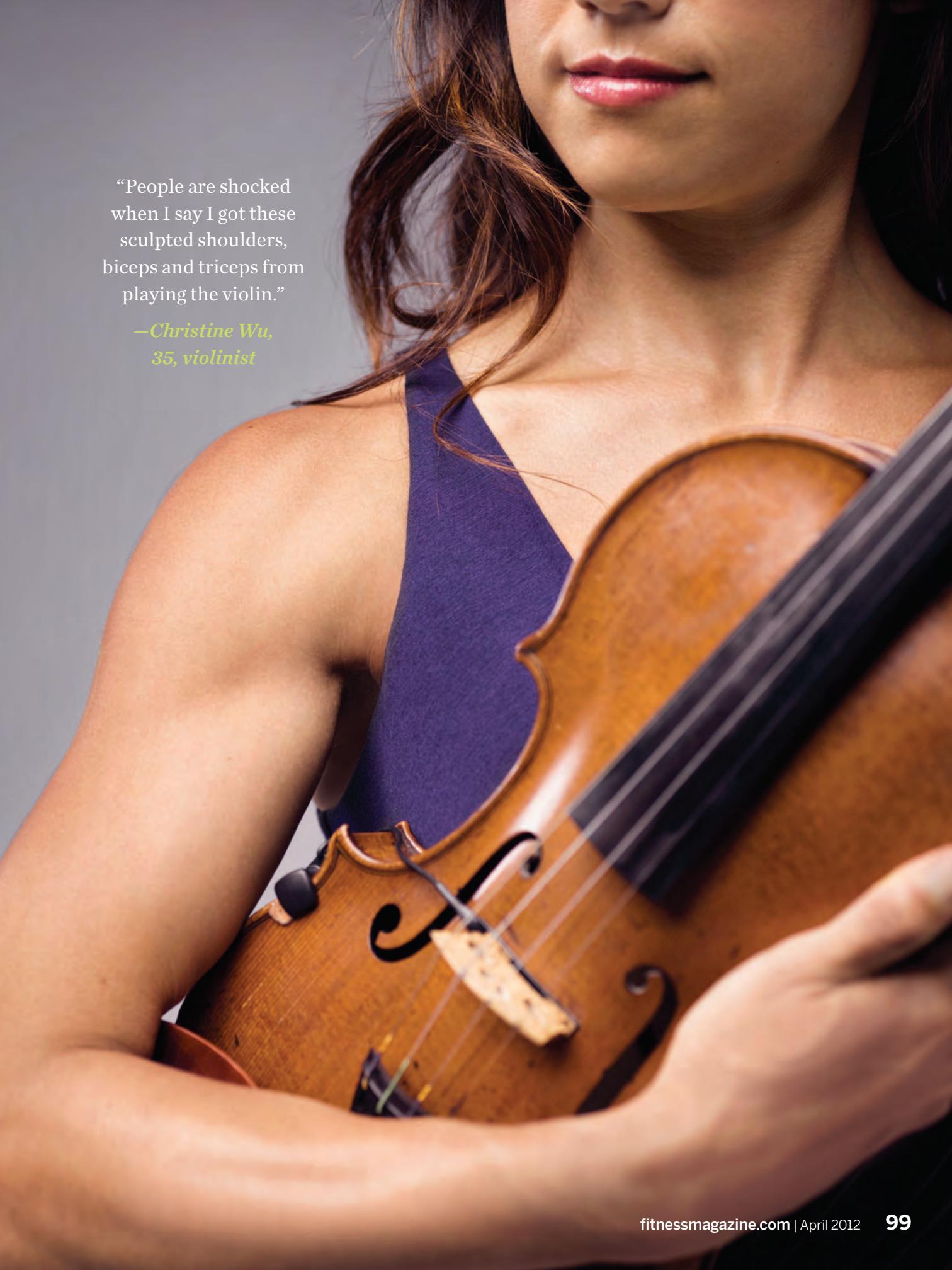
As told to Leslie Goldman Photographs by Coral von Zumwalt



live healthy

“My strong derriere gives me the power to pull 195 pounds of hose into a fire to douse the flames.”

—*Jeanette Pierre, 30, firefighter*



“People are shocked when I say I got these sculpted shoulders, biceps and triceps from playing the violin.”

—*Christine Wu,*
35, violinist



“The scars from
my knee surgery
remind me what I am:
athletic, competitive
and passionate.”

*—Renata Merino
Bregstone,
39, former high
school and college
athlete*



“My hands are my livelihood, the way I communicate, my life force.”

—*Elizabeth McGrath,*
40, artist



HALEY DIDIER

24, assistant ranch manager,
Fort Collins, Colorado

A typical day has me stacking and loading up to 30 bales of hay, cleaning animal pens and hoisting massive garage doors. My abs are the first muscles I call on for every task: When riding a quarter horse at full speed across the prairie as I round up mares, I need to keep my core contracted and my back straight to maintain my balance and follow the horse's motion. Animals can sense when you're in control. If I were wobbling around with a weak center of gravity, the horses wouldn't have any confidence in me and might even try to buck me.

Before this job, I struggled with my body image for years. I never appreciated how my body could serve me in the way that it has. Now I look in the mirror and feel strong, confident and powerful.



AMANDA BALDING

34, triathlete, Noosa, Australia,
and Bend, Oregon

In 2000, I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. After three years in remission, the cancer returned in my spine. As a result of the steroids prescribed for my recovery, I gained 40 pounds, and that destroyed my body image. I was lying on the couch one day, feeling sorry for myself, when I saw a show about Dick and Rick Hoyt—a father-and-son team who compete in marathons and triathlons, the father pushing his paralyzed son in a wheelchair. I cried and felt ashamed that I was wasting my life being sad. I promised myself I would change everything. I left an unhappy marriage and job and began to compete.

Years of training have morphed my body from soft and voluptuous post-cancer to lean and rock solid. At five foot nine and 132 pounds, I'm actually considered large in my sport. But when I dieted down to 128 to see if my speed would improve, I quickly lost all of my power and endurance. I'm a farm girl from a family of 13 kids who all know how to eat! Food is my fuel. I may not be the fastest competitor out there, but I'm always the most grateful, because I'm strong, healthy and alive. Having cancer changes your perspective: You no longer take your body for granted.



JEANETTE PIERRE

30, firefighter,
Atlanta

Before I got pregnant six years ago with my second child, DeKotah, I had a fairly flat backside. I always felt a little self-conscious about it, because I had such large thighs but nothing to balance them out from behind. Plus having a thick behind is so prized in black culture. But I gained a healthy 32 pounds while pregnant and a lot of that went to my butt . . . and never left.

People have described my booty as apple-bottomed, but the word that comes to my mind is powerful. This butt propels me up flight after flight of stairs while I'm wearing 75 pounds of firefighter gear and helps me hustle to respond to calls—sometimes as many as 20 times a day.

It's almost impossible to find jeans that fit, and I have a little cellulite, but I wouldn't trade my backside for anything. Pulling on a pair of leggings makes me feel so sexy. And now my male friends will joke, "Hate to see you go, but love to watch you leave!"



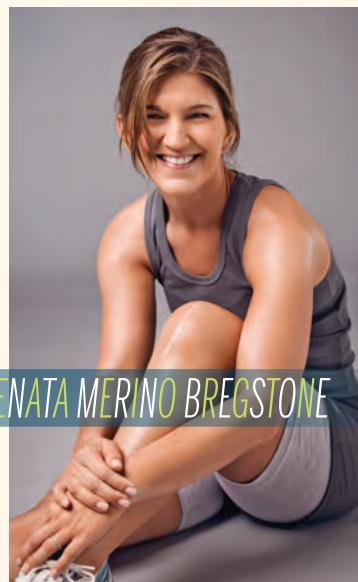
CHRISTINE WU

35, violinist,
Los Angeles

I hold my violin on my left side, between my shoulder and chin, with my left arm bent at a 45-degree angle, and I bow back and forth with my right arm. It's like I'm in a perpetual lateral raise. Sometimes I'll play for two hours without taking a break, so it's no wonder I look as if I spend hours in the weight room.

Actually I do have to train, just like an athlete, to keep my neck and rotator cuffs strong to prevent repetitive stress injuries. That's why I'm in the gym six days a week strength-training, practicing Pilates and ballet, and running or playing tennis to build the stamina I need to last through several shows each week. Plus, in the music industry, looks matter. My arms look strong and graceful, and that translates into a strong, graceful performance.

Even though my right arm is more developed than my left from all that bowing, I feel intense satisfaction whenever I catch a glimpse of myself as I play. I see the countless hours I've poured into my training since age 2, the afternoons spent indoors practicing while my friends played outside, the places I've traveled—Singapore, South Africa, Europe—to perform. I see a lifetime of hard work, and it looks stunning.



RENATA MERINO BREGSTONE

39, former high school and college athlete,
Glencoe, Illinois

I was a senior in high school, sprinting down the soccer field during practice when I heard a sickening tear and a loud pop. It was my ACL, a stabilizing knee ligament, giving out after years of pounding during competitive sports. I still remember picking up a pay phone at school several days later to call in for my MRI results. The doctor told me that not only did I need reconstructive surgery on my left knee, but also that I couldn't play soccer for a year or two. I was the captain of my team and sports were a huge part of how I defined myself. I was devastated. I just crumpled onto the floor, crying hysterically.

My knee has two metal screws in it from the surgery. And more than 20 years later it still acts up from time to time, causing me pain while I'm running, playing tennis or Spinning. When that happens, I have to skip my cardio workout or slow down when chasing after my two kids. There are good days, though—when I can run pain-free for 10 miles.

While I am sometimes slow to show off my knees, I don't regret that sports were part of my life. Athletics taught me to be competitive and a team player and to never give up. My scars remind me of that.



ELIZABETH McGRATH

40, artist,
Los Angeles

Manicures are pretty much a waste of money for me. I have to keep my nails supershort so they don't mark up the wet resin I use to make sculptures. Besides, the nail technicians scold me for how awful my hands look. I usually have oil paint wedged under my nails, cuts from the tools I carve with or crimson-stained fingers from the pomegranate juice I sometimes use as a natural dye.

That said, my hands are my best feature. They enable me to create whimsical, fantastical pieces, like a six-legged deer covered with 70,000 Swarovski crystals or a burlap buffalo balancing a cruise ship on its head.

I've been showing my sculptures in art galleries for a decade now, and I get such a rush looking around and seeing all that my hands have brought to life. My energy flows through them, whether they're tingly and numb from overuse or the veins are popping out from kneading clay. My hands may look kind of gnarled and older than my years, but they are my tools, and to me, they're beautiful.