

'I'm Healthy Thanks to Mom'

Meet three mother-daughter pairs who inspire each other to live longer and stronger.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN



Heidi and daughter Kailey

When it comes to getting—and staying—healthy, the people who surround us have a tremendous influence. Mothers, forever our role models, have an especially powerful effect, and research bears this out: One study showed that mothers who upped their daily physical activity by 1,000 steps inspired their daughters to take an extra 200 steps. Another, published in *The International Journal of Obesity*, showed that moms who ate healthfully and exercised were more likely to have kids with those overall good habits, too.

In honor of Mother's Day, we spoke with three mother-daughter duos who took advantage of the pass-it-on effect and improved their health together.

we took up RUNNING

Heidi Aponte, 35
Kailey, 9 Golden, CO

HEIDI: When I was growing up, my mom, Wendy, ran marathons and triathlons, and dragged me along to participate in the kids' "fun" runs. I disliked every minute of it; I was more into science club than physical fitness. As I got older, I realized how happy running made my mom; she put in 5 miles every day, even through the pain of degenerative bone disease, so I decided to be supportive of her passion. I even got fired from a hostess job for calling in sick so I could cheer her on at a marathon finish line.

It wasn't until my mom passed away in March 2000 at 44 that a college roommate convinced me to run a 5-mile race. At the starting line, I silently dedicated the run to my mother, and it was thinking of her that helped me get through the 5 miles. After college, I joined the U.S. Coast Guard, where daily runs were required. That's where I met my now-husband, Edward, and our runs were often the only times we had to really be alone.

After our first daughter, Kailey, was born in 2004, I signed up for a half marathon to lose the baby weight. That's when I truly found the joy my mom experienced: Running made me feel focused and

strong, and even helped curb the depression I began to experience in my 20s.

These days, I log 40–50 miles per week, and I finished first place in the female division of my first triathlon. In 2010, I started my own blog, *runlikemymother.com*, and in 2013, I became a certified running coach to help others find their passion, like my mom and I found ours. But my favorite part of running is sharing it with Kailey. She’s a member of her school’s running club, and we participate in local fun runs together. I recently helped organize her elementary school’s 5K fund-raiser (Kailey did the 1-mile fun run with her younger sister, Claire, 5). And this past Thanksgiving, our entire family joined in, including our youngest, Lily, and finished a 5K. (Edward pushed our younger two kids in a stroller.)

For Kailey and me, running is much more than a bonding opportunity—it allows us to enjoy nature, stay healthy, and carry on my mother’s legacy.

KAILEY: Running with my mom is a lot of fun, and it feels good. One of my favorite running memories is our first fun run in Orange Park, Florida. I got tired, but my mom helped me keep going, and we made it to the finish line together.

Our top tips

PICK YOUR PASSION You’re more likely to stick with exercising if it’s an activity you both really love, whether it’s running, dancing, swimming, or hiking.

SIGN UP FOR A FUND-RAISING EVENT Choose a cause close to your family’s heart. There’s no better motivation to stick to your exercise program. —Heidi

we beat BREAST CANCER

Anne Vaclavik, 66 *Fillmore, NY*
Nicki Miller, 42 *Livonia, NY*

ANNE: In January of 2012, I found a 2½-centimeter lump in my right breast; it turned out to be a slow-growing but invasive breast cancer. Even though my sister and two first cousins had the disease, I was still stunned—and afraid. Due to my family history and the fact that the density of my breasts make MRIs difficult to read, I opted for a double mastectomy, and I asked my daughters if they’d had baseline mammograms. My older daughter, Wendy, had (and the mammogram was clear), but Nicki, then 40, had not.

NICKI: Four months after Mom’s diagnosis, I visited her breast clinic for my first mammogram. The radiologist found a slightly suspicious-looking cluster of cells in my left breast. Because of Mom’s experience, I had a biopsy. It revealed cancer in the milk ducts. Fortunately, it hadn’t spread, and I didn’t need radiation or chemotherapy.



Nicki, left,
with mom
Anne

Since I'd been on the phone with my mom constantly throughout her treatment, the territory felt familiar. I was always putting myself in her shoes as we weighed her options, so I knew I also wanted a bilateral mastectomy. Overnight, Mom turned her focus from her own healing to mine, and she became my sounding board, my personal researcher, my caretaker.

Now cancer-free, we support one another on our oncology checkups, and we participate in 12-hour Relay for Life fund-raising walks. We're both committed to educating women about reconstruction options and are always on the phone, exchanging what we call our "gratefuls," and focusing on being able to enjoy "normal" days and the blessing of being there for each other through this journey.

Our top tips

TALK ABOUT YOUR FAMILY HEALTH

HISTORY Our conversations helped Nicki get diagnosed at an early stage. Fear shouldn't keep you from being informed. Make your health a family conversation. —Anne

ASK YOUR DOCTOR WHEN TO HAVE YOUR FIRST MAMMOGRAM If you have a family history of breast cancer, she may recommend you come in earlier or more frequently. —Nicki



Lenora, left, with daughter Karenga

we lost 90 POUNDS

Lenora Bryant, 61 *Griffin, GA*
Karenga Ross, 35 *Fayetteville, GA*

LENORA: "This brand just runs small." That's what I would tell myself when I had to go up a size when shopping for golf shorts. But in 2008, at 195 pounds, I decided to do something about my expanding waistline and signed up for a Weight Watchers program at my office. My goal: To reach a healthy BMI and achieve lifetime membership status, which guarantees free admission

to meetings—the camaraderie and group support was my favorite part.

By March of 2009, I had lost 30 pounds. My next goal was to convince Karenga to join me.

KARENGA: After my two pregnancies, I weighed 220 pounds and wore a size 18/20. But I'm tall like my mom, so I blamed it on being big-boned. Even though my knees ached and I was always out of breath, I was never inspired to trim down. Plus, I assumed all thin people were hungry—and angry. But in late 2010, my mom came to visit, and she looked fabulous. We were sitting on the sofa when my youngest daughter started crawling toward a lamp. I started rocking back and forth to get up, but

Mom just sprang up like nothing. And she wasn't angry and hungry! That afternoon, Mom took me to the grocery store and showed me how to shop the perimeter for fresh produce and low-fat protein like chicken breasts. The next day, she took me to a Weight Watchers meeting, and I signed up on the spot.

My meetings were on Sunday morning, and that afternoon, Mom would text me to check in. Once I started exercising, the weight really fell off, and now I'm down more than 60 pounds. My mom tells me I help her stay on track and keep the weight off because we're in this together. But seeing her thin—and happy—was truly my inspiration. ■

Our top tips

PARTNER WITH A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND Make sure she or he is committed to achieving and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. As a Weight Watchers leader, I see many family members come in together, but as soon as one falls off the wagon, the other does, too. Hold each other accountable. —Lenora

HAVE AN END GOAL BESIDES LOSING WEIGHT This helps you stay motivated. For me, it was being able to keep up with my kids. Before, I couldn't fit down the slide at the park; now we go down together. I also jog around the track with my older kids, and we're able to enjoy tons of fun activities together. —Karenga