

These four extraordinary WW members have all faced tough times to get where they are today. So it's time to celebrate their amazing life-changing journeys.

# wonder

Words Gina Flaxman Photography Joshua Morris Styling Donny Gallella Hair and makeup Sarah Wright

# women



**anna.**

**ANNA VAN DYKEN**

**AGE 46**

**HEIGHT 164cm**

**START WEIGHT 142kg**

**WEIGHT NOW 72kg**

**WEIGHT LOST 70kg**

**TIME TAKEN Four years**

**HOW Group Coaching**

**with Andrea Walsh**

**in Riverton, WA**

*The idea of giving up never entered my head.*

5 minutes



*Weight Watchers has brought Mum and I closer together.*



**jacinta.**

**JACINTA ELLWOOD**  
**AGE** 23  
**HEIGHT** 178cm  
**START WEIGHT** 151kg  
**WEIGHT NOW** 95kg  
**WEIGHT LOST** 56kg  
**TIME TAKEN** Two years  
**HOW** One-on-one  
Coaching with  
Mimma Pozzebon in  
Highpoint, Vic

COVER STORY



# emily.

**EMILY  
KOSSEN**  
 AGE 21  
 HEIGHT 146cm  
 START WEIGHT 74kg  
 CURRENT WEIGHT 58kg  
 WEIGHT LOST 16kg  
 TIME TAKEN 18 months  
 HOW Group Coaching  
 with Susan Hill  
 in Bull Creek, WA



Emily's  
 learning to  
 make *healthy*  
 choices and  
 that's a  
 wonderful step  
 in becoming  
*independent.*  
 Emily's mum, Lisa



# beauty





*I'll never leave myself behind again.*

# renate.

**RENATE FLAHERTY**

**AGE** 56

**HEIGHT** 162cm

**START WEIGHT** 111kg

**WEIGHT NOW** 81kg

**WEIGHT LOST** 30kg

**TIME TAKEN** 10 months

**HOW** Group Coaching with Sheridan Emmanuel and Nancy Macheda in Gawler, SA



# Howover



## Anna's story

Anna Van Dyken is a Weight Watchers phenomenon. From walking into her first meeting four years ago weighing 142kg, she has turned her family's and her own life around. She's now an online sensation, with 6500 Instagram followers and 1000 WW Connect followers, who read her recipes and look up to her as a mentor.

"This is my community," she says. "People feel like they know me. They text and email and ask questions, and I'm honest. I love inspiring and helping others."

Her journey began in 2012 when she watched her son Ethan, then 10 and weighing almost 80kg, struggle to finish a cross-country race at school. "He finished 15 minutes after everyone else and this was my moment. I thought, 'What have I done?' Our whole family was obese."

Four days after the race, Anna walked into her first Weight Watchers meeting. "My then-Coach, Kristy Archibald, who's now my personal trainer, said to me afterwards, 'The look on your face told a thousand stories. I didn't think you'd make it.' The meeting was very confronting. I was there for Ethan, not for me."



BEFORE

### At a crossroads

A month after Anna started WW, her husband Rodney went bankrupt and the family lost their business, house and cars. "We were at a crossroads. I thought about giving up WW, but Rodney said, 'You can't put a price on your health,' so I persevered. I was morbidly obese and the doctor said I wouldn't see 60; I was scared for Ethan. That same month Rodney was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, so I decided that making us all healthy was the most important thing."

Anna says she had to educate herself about food and portion control. "I didn't know what portion control was. I love cooking and I come from an Italian background where you show your love for people through food. It took time to learn a different way of cooking."

But once she got the hang of it, the whole family's weight began to drop off, with Rodney losing 35kg and Ethan losing 16kg. In just nine months, Rodney was able to come off his diabetes medication. For these efforts, and her own weight loss of 32kg after that time, Anna won the Weight Watchers Inspiration Award in 2013.

"Winning the award was very overwhelming because it was done by public vote so I knew that my story had resonated with other people and by telling my story I was helping others," she says.

### A new focus

After the award, Anna shifted her focus – from Rodney and Ethan to herself. "I became a priority. Now it was my turn to focus on my weight loss. I was so determined to succeed, nothing was going to get in my way."

She says she hit some tough times, particularly a weight-loss plateau that lasted three months. "It was very frustrating but the idea of giving up never entered my head. I went back to basics: I put my kitchen scales back on my bench

so I could weigh everything and I went back to pen and paper, writing down every single thing I ate. I also tried to shake things up a bit: doing an extra walk or trying a Zumba class."

She then became more serious about exercise, first increasing her number of walks and working on pace and distance. Then she started to include boxing and has recently begun strength training, which she loves. "I'm so in awe of what my body can do."

She now dedicates two hours every day to going for a walk or doing something for herself. "I've learned the importance of making myself a priority. It's a huge step."

### Total honesty

Anna has now reached her Goal weight of 72kg, having lost a total of 70kg, and has become a mentor to many members who love her honesty about issues such as her loose skin. "People ask me about it and I'm brutally honest. It's part of me and it does bother me but being healthy is more important." People are also inspired by the recipes she posts on her Instagram and Facebook page, Feed Me Healthy with Anna Van Dyken, most of which are her own creations. "Recipes don't need to be complicated," she says. "I want to show people how easy it is to add flavour and to make things look appealing. It only takes five minutes to make something look good and then you're satisfied before you've even started eating."

Anna's advice to others on their weight-loss journey? "Don't overthink everything. Never feel guilty about a slight gain. If you slip up, make the next meal a better one. It's not a race; the journey is yours alone. It doesn't matter how long it takes; you're worth the effort."

"Weight Watchers has taught me so much," says Anna. "It's not just about food and losing weight – what amazes me is how my mindset has changed. I'm so proud of who I've become."

## Jacinta's story

"I was a chubby kid," says Jacinta Ellwood. "And then, as I got older, I just started gaining more and more weight." Things became worse when she left school and moved in with her boyfriend and they would order takeaway every night.

"At my heaviest, I hid. I wouldn't leave the house. If I went anywhere I was so conscious of the space I was taking up on the tram. I was ashamed I'd let it get to that point." Then, at 21, she developed a liver infection and had to go to hospital for a week. "It took a month before I was back to normal," she says. "I was so wiped out; I needed a nap after doing the dishes. It scared me into starting to look after myself. I thought, 'If I'm like this at 21, the future doesn't look good.' I knew I needed to turn my life around."

Jacinta and her boyfriend broke up, she got a new job and then her mother suggested she try Weight Watchers.

### The first step

"My mum was doing one-on-one meetings so I went along and had one after her. I was petrified at the first meeting. It all seemed impossible."

But Jacinta says in the beginning, because she was so big she only needed to change a few meals to start seeing results. She started off walking just 10 minutes a day and built up gradually.

She now walks for half an hour to an hour every morning and has been inspired to finish her hairdressing qualifications. "I started when I finished school and decided it wasn't for me. When I put on so much weight I didn't think people would hire me. But then, when I lost weight, I decided to give it another go and now I'm loving it."

Working as a hairdresser also means she's on her feet all day. "I don't feel drained like I did when I was sitting in an office," she says.



BEFORE

### Tough times

"When I tried to lose weight before I would cut everything out and then just binge," Jacinta says. "Now if I make a mistake, I start again at the next meal. I don't throw the whole day away."

She says Weight Watchers works for her because of the accountability. "You have to go every week, weigh in and face the Coach. But they're not mean or judgemental. They give you the tools for the week ahead."

She says she has been struggling in the past six months and still has to lose 15kg to reach her Goal weight of 80kg, but as we all know, the journey is as important – if not more important – than the destination. "It's still hard sometimes. But when I look at how far I've come, it turns things around straight away." And she knows she's definitely on the right track now.

### Building bridges

Jacinta says one of the best things about WW is that it's helped her rebuild her relationship with her mother. "We didn't get along at all before. I avoided seeing any of my family because I was so embarrassed about my weight. Now, every Saturday, Mum and I have coffee and breakfast after our meetings. And every time I have a bad day I call her and vice versa. It's really helped bring us closer together."

Jacinta says life is very different to what it was like two years ago. "Everything has turned around. I'm more sociable, I don't have to hide anymore. I jump out of bed at the start of each day!" >





## Emily's story

Emily Kossen is an outgoing 21-year-old who loves drama, dance and Weight Watchers meetings. "I love socialising with the ladies," she says. She also has Down syndrome.

Her mum, Lisa, says most people with this disability also have thyroid problems and a slow metabolism, which makes it harder for them to lose weight. It was at a dance competition in 2015 when Lisa noticed that, out of the five girls on stage with Down syndrome, Emily was the biggest. "I thought, 'How did I let this happen?'" I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility for it and I knew I had to do something."

Lisa says the family first tried a weight-loss meal-delivery service. "It was working but Emily wanted to eat my food and I missed cooking too!" So she took Emily to a Weight Watchers meeting as she loves to belong to a group.

## Rocky start

Both mother and daughter found Weight Watchers hard at first. "It was an education for me," says Lisa. "I tracked Emily's *SmartPoints* religiously for about six months. I admit it took some getting used to, but it's second nature now." She says Emily didn't want to change her eating habits in the beginning. "We fought for six months but slowly her mindset started to change and she wanted to make healthy choices. She learns visually so I put things down on paper to help her see them."

Emily does a drama and life skills course at TAFE once a week, which involves buying a meal in a food court for herself. "Before Weight Watchers I used to have Macca's or pizza but now I have a toasted sandwich," says Emily.



BEFORE

## Support system

Lisa says Emily is used to feeling different so being the only person in her meetings with Down syndrome doesn't bother her. "It's a place where she belongs and is accepted. Her Coach, Susan, is lovely and really listens to her. Every week she asks who has something to celebrate and Emily always has something. Sometimes it's weight-loss related but often it's just something like, 'I went to TAFE today!'"

Emily has an active week. In addition to her class at TAFE and her WW meeting, she works two days a week as a hospital cleaner. "I have the best support workers," she says, and she can now perform all her duties independently. She also does dance and swimming classes on Saturdays, goes to gym with a support person twice a week and learns skills such as cooking and shopping once a week at a government support program.

Lisa and her family have worked hard to give Emily as much independence as possible in a mainstream environment with the aim for her to be living

semi-independently by the time she's 30. "Emily's learning to make healthy choices and that's a wonderful step in becoming independent and taking responsibility for her life," says Lisa.

"I'm proud I've lost all that weight," says Emily.

One year later at the dance competition and Emily was feeling more confident about herself. "It was wonderful to see," says Lisa. "Before, she had to wear baggy clothes, but now she can wear young people's clothes like shorts and tank tops. It gives me joy to see her being able to dress like other young girls her age.

"It's also a burden lifted from me because I feel so responsible for her life. Now I feel I've helped her to live a healthier life."

## Renate's story

As a paramedic and mum of two, Renate Flaherty was used to putting other people's needs before her own. She had always struggled with her weight and tried lots of different diets in the past. Then about 10 years ago she became ill with an immune system condition and had to take steroid medications. "I became inactive and started putting on more weight.

It was a vicious cycle," she says. Though she got better and came off her medication, she didn't have the motivation to lose weight. Then her daughter, now 20, got sick with what doctors first thought was severe depression, but then realised was multiple sclerosis. "We had a hard ride for a few years," says Renate. "She had episodes where she couldn't walk, talk or focus. It got to a point where I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I had moments where I'd sit in the corner and cry."

## Turning point

At the beginning of last year, with her daughter doing better, Renate decided to do something for herself. "I thought, 'If she can get better, I can lose weight.' I went into Weight Watchers and signed up at the gym the following week. My daughter's courage gave me the motivation to finally do it. She sort of saved my life."

As a full-time paramedic, Renate works two 10-hour days and two 14-hour nights with four days off and often does two extra shifts because her team is short-staffed. "Before, I would snack throughout the night," she says. "It's easy to just have a cheeseburger or grab a chocolate bar in the middle of the night if you've got nothing with you."

Now when she works night shifts, she tries to keep her food intake in line with a normal day. "I'll have a healthy dinner at 6pm and a snack at 9pm, but that's it; I won't eat again until the morning. I find if I eat properly, I'm not hungry."

## Exercise daily

Before WW, Renate says she wanted to go back to the gym. "I would drive there, but I couldn't bring myself to go in. I was so self-conscious about how I looked. I used to love combat and dance classes but I couldn't do them because I was so overweight." She started walking on the treadmill at the gym

and now runs and does classes again. "I do something every day. If I have a quiet day at work I'll do step-ups on the steps."

## Dramatic transformation

Renate lost 30kg in just 10 months and celebrated with a trip to Melbourne. "I bought a whole new wardrobe," she says. "I threw out 12 bags of clothes!"

She says her transformation has been so dramatic that people who haven't seen her for a while don't recognise her. And the changes haven't just been physical. "I've inspired other people at work to lose weight and I've restarted our social program, which will raise money for worthy causes. I'm so inspired and have so much energy."

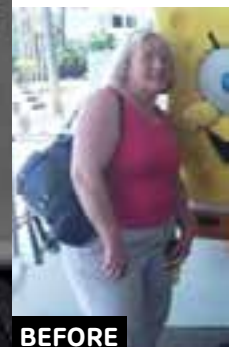
Renate's daughter is now in Africa on a scholarship but still gets very tired. "I make sure she has her meds; I need to know the basic stuff is being done. She's had a good year but we don't know from day to day what will happen."

Whatever happens, though, she knows she's now able to cope with it. "I've put myself first now. There will be times when things will change again but I'll never leave myself behind again." ■



## super stars

Our four wonder women have all battled adversity to lose incredible amounts of weight. This shoot was a chance to reward them for all their hard work – and they all had a fabulous time. Our cover star, Anna, says, "The photo shoot was like all my Christmases and birthdays had come at once. It's the cherry on top of my weight-loss journey." Renate (left) says, "I can't believe I'm in this photo shoot. I have to pinch myself!"



BEFORE