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Stage presentation at ESU tackles sick side of 'bigorexia'

MARTA GOUGER
Pocono Life Editor
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It was a high holy day, but Michael Feldman refused to go with his parents to the temple. He said he wanted to go to the gym.

That's when the Brooklyn high school student realized his priorities were mixed up. It wasn't until later, though, that he realized he had an obsession or an eating disorder — he felt compelled to work out until he had the perfect body.

"In my sophomore year of high school, I had a desire to have the perfect midsection," he recalled. "The reason I started was that I felt ugly and since I couldn't change my face, I felt I could change my body. I could have that control."

The issue of male eating disorders will be the topic of Feldman's theatrical presentation, "MuscleBound," coming to East Stroudsburg University tonight.

What he has is bigorexia, or muscular dysmorphia — preoccupation with muscle development which may involve a disturbance in body image similar to anorexia.

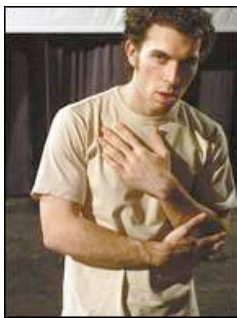
No matter what he did, he said, "I felt like a little stick."

Feldman added, "I didn't even come to terms with it until I started the piece. I was always restricting calories and I never thought of it as an addiction."

Another defining moment was at the end of his high school career when he was attending a bar mitzvah with his parents. He needed help to tie his tie, and his dad stood behind him to help. His dad told him he was really getting thin. When his dad, who rarely said anything, told him that, he recalled, "I knew it had to be something huge if my dad was bringing it up." That night he binged. "I didn't know what to do," he said.



Michael Feldman used to work out every day and would 'go crazy' if he missed a session. While at New York University, he realized it was an illness. His presentation, 'MuscleBound,' addresses it as a social issue.



Michael Feldman, a recovering 'bigorexic,' thinks he's still too thin. At 5 feet, 10 inches tall, weighing 155 pounds, he said, 'I don't know that I am fully cured. I enjoy food, but I never put something into my mouth without knowing the nutritional value.'

When he started researching and came across bigorexia, he said, "Oh, my God, I fit this exactly. So many guys have this and have no idea."

The production started as a student project at New York University, but it evolved into a show he takes across the country to college and high school campuses.

Why focus on men? Linda Van Meter, assistant professor and psychologist of counseling and psychological services, and event organizer at ESU, said, "It used to be that people with eating disorders were 93 percent women and the rest were men. Now it's 90 percent women, and a lot of people are not diagnosed but have issues."

Van Meter said she has seen men with body image issues. "We also want to give participants a better awareness about issues surrounding body image, muscle dysmorphia, eating disorders, and steroid use in men," she said.

Feldman tries to present a realistic picture. Many documentaries on eating disorders focus on the extreme, with women who are down to 70 pounds and dying. "I don't have that. I'm not that extreme. The guys who spoke are normal and ordinary, talking about things that nobody talks about," Feldman said.

It's a double standard. "A girl who works out that much has an eating disorder. A guy who focuses that much is disciplined."

The 90-minute show deals with these issues. It's intertwined with film clips and three different characters, all played by Feldman. There's the film guy, Nick, who is directing the project; Josh Goldstein, a different form of Feldman, who has graduated from high school and is starting college. He works in an ice cream store and just loves ice cream, he is an exercise bulimic. In this script, he plays Josh as well as the ice cream.

The third character is Jim, the personal trainer. Jim is actually Josh's personal trainer and he always boasts. Yet, behind the scenes he takes



For the film clips, he interviewed 30 men over the course of a year. He found guys in all walks of life, ranging from college freshmen to 65-year-olds. These were guys who go to the gym, guys who've been on steroids for years, guys who were obsessed with the gym and more. He found them through an ad he placed on the Internet.

"I wanted to get more guys with eating disorders; but all were willing to talk over the phone, but they didn't want to be on film." So the film gets darker as it goes on, to show less of people's faces. One guy who was supposed to be interviewed didn't show up on the day of the interview. When he spoke to the mother of the young man, an Orthodox Jew, he finally realized why his parents were against it. She was worried that if word got out, he'd never get married. The man was an exercise bulimic, who binged on food, then worked out for two to three hours at a time.

The only way he would do the interview was without showing his face.

"We need to open up to raise awareness, start a dialogue about these issues for men," Feldman said.

"Where men are with eating disorders is where women were 20 years ago. People said, 'Oh, it's just for people with affluent backgrounds.' As it kept getting larger and more media attention." Men are aspiring to be like the half-naked men in commercials.

One guy whose face is blacked out in the film was anorexic for years, to the point where he was down to 100 pounds. "He worked out like crazy because when he was younger he was heavy. He said he'd rather die skinny than live fat," Feldman said.



Michael Feldman in "Musclebound" a "MuscleBound," a multimedia performance and documentary on issues related to body image and men.

Another guy was HIV positive and had cancer. "After all the treatment, he was so grateful to be alive; but he couldn't lift the bar in the gym and he said, 'What's the point of all this?'"

Through putting together the presentation, Feldman started to work through his own addiction. However, he urges others to get help. "The relapse rate with eating disorders is 80 percent. It's more than control," Feldman said.

Eating disorders become a way to fill a void. To avoid relapse, people need to find their passion.

"My greatest passion is being up on stage," Feldman said. He credits his friends and support system for helping him through.

He still works out three to four times a week. "If I miss a workout, I don't go crazy now." And while he still pays attention to calorie and fat counts, he takes time to eat some good fattening foods.

Now he looks in the mirror and realizes he's too thin. At 5 feet, 10 inches tall, weighing 155 pounds, he said, "I don't know that I am fully cured. I enjoy food, but I never put something into my mouth without knowing the nutritional value."

The presentation is followed by a question-and-answer period with Feldman, director Adam Laopus and often a health counselor.

Some guys get up and walk out, Feldman said. Others say they never thought about the disorder or that they thought they were the only ones.