

I Am Not an Activist

by Leah Strock

My friends who live on the west coast are activists. They went in front of a billboard advertising a 24 hour gym that stated "when the aliens come, they will eat the fat ones first" My friends exercised, and carried signs that said eat me and were all over the media. They went on to get a law passed in San Francisco against size discrimination. When I went to the theater in SF and saw the back row was full of armless chairs, it brought tears to my eyes, cause those were my friends. I am so proud to know those activists.

My friends who live in Brooklyn are activists. They went down to Brooklyn's city hall and protested when the borough president put Brooklyn on a diet and called the program "Lighten up Brooklyn" They had people actually weigh in on a scale on the steps of city hall. My friends came back at them with "love your body Brooklyn" and had people get on a scale that was rigged to give no numbers but just cheer people on with things like - "you're beautiful" I am so proud to know those activists.

My friends led the million pound march off of Santa Monica Beach and came together to proclaim the unity of the fat acceptance movement in fighting discrimination and empowering fat people. I am so proud to know those activists.

And of course there is Lynn McAfee... Lynn McAfee has been there since the beginning of size activism and she has so much to say. I am so proud to know her.

You see, I never considered myself an activist. I don't get out in front of the cameras, I don't scream chants and I don't do the media thing - its not me...However, I want to tell you a story...

Last year, I was sitting at my receptionist's desk firing up the computer and I noticed this ad sitting off to the side of her desk. It was a picture of the back of three fat women walking down the beach in bathing suits. The text underneath stated, "Bad things happen when you move from the city". It was an advertisement for Manhattan Mini-storage.

I got really miffed about this ad and decided to call the corporate office. I asked to speak to the CEO. I got his secretary on the line and told her that I had two storage rooms at Manhattan Mini-storage and because of the advertisements; I was going to shut down my storage and move it elsewhere. (I really didn't have any storage there but I did know people who did). The secretary was really nice. I told her why I was so upset and then asked her if she were a large woman. She replied, "no" I asked her if the CEO had any large-sized people in his family and she said "yes". I suggested he bring the ad home and show his family members and asked them what they thought.

She asked for my phone number and I gave it to her.

The following morning I received a call from Stacey Stewart the VP in charge of advertising for Manhattan Mini-storage. I told her I was so happy to hear from her and thanked her profusely for calling me. I told her how upsetting the ads were. I asked her why she was trying to alienate potential fat customers. I told her that I thought her ads were hurtful and explained how our society tends to encourage discrimination against large people, especially women. I then asked her if she was a large woman. She replied no but she had put on a couple of pounds since the birth of her daughter. "Daughter?" I asked? (Hone in on the daughter thing!) I told her that the incidence of anorexia and bulimia rates in high school girls is at an all time high and that ads like this tend to perpetuate that kind of behavior and how would she feel if her daughter had an eating disorder. I then told her that I could arrange a large-scale (no pun intended) protest in front of all Manhattan Mini-storage places but I would rather have her know what it is like to walk in my shoes. She thanked me very much for calling and told me that the ads were not being run again and that they were pulling the existing ones. She told me that they in fact had received calls regarding this ad. (I did not tell her that I called everyone I knew who had storage space at Manhattan Mini-storage and gave them the CEO's name and number and they all called too!)

The following day I got to work and there was a message on my voicemail saying, "Leah, this is Stacey Stewart from Manhattan Mini-storage, I want you to know that I thought a lot about what you said yesterday. I was on the bus going home and I thought about my daughter and I thought about my daughter's teacher Trish, who is the most wonderful woman and that Trish is a very, very large woman. And I thought about how much we love her and how I never think of her as big, just as Trish. I also thought about how hurt she would be if she saw that ad and I thought about how glad I am that she lives in NJ so she will never have to see that ad. So I really want to thank you for opening my eyes to all of this and again, I promise we will never run an ad like that again."

Ok, so maybe I am an activist. And I am truly proud that not only will this company never run an ad like that again but that she got it! She really got what I was talking about. I do believe in grass roots activism. I think its important that people make noise but I also think that it is very important that people get what we are trying to say and sometimes yelling and screaming is not the way but it is a way to get their attention.

We are a nation of large size people. We are getting larger and larger and it is important for people to stop apologizing for being large and realize that they must take a stand on these issues. It is up to each one of us to make a difference even if it means simply making a phone call. 