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'I feel this has literally saved my life'

BY RICK FOSTER SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

Don't be shocked. If you haven't run into Walter and Lina Zuschlag in a while, you might have trouble recognizing them. That's because the Attleboro couple, who struggled for years to lose weight, have dropped a combined 150 pounds after both partners underwent lap band surgery in 2008.

"We tried every diet, some of them twice, but we couldn't keep the weight off," said Walter Zuschlag, 58, a field engineer for Toyota who weighed in at more than 300 pounds before undergoing the surgery at Norwood Hospital in early 2008. He's now down to 205.

Lina Zuschlag has lost 50 pounds from her peak weight of 292, and aims to drop another 50.

"I feel this has literally saved my life," said Walter Zuschlag, who had already suffered a stroke and had heart problems he blames on his weight. "I feel great, and I have so much more energy now."

Lina says both she and her husband have become more active and are enjoying life these days.

Walter has resumed running and works on antique cars in his backyard. The pair enjoy traveling and hiking, activities they scarcely dared attempt only a couple of years ago.

"It feels great to be able to get into an airline seat and not feel you're crowding another person," Walter said.

Lina says she and her husband used to spend most of their time at home, but now look forward to getting out and hiking or going on recreational trips to California and Las Vegas.



Lina and Walter Zuschlag underwent lap band surgery within months of one another, and have lost a combined 150 pounds. (Staff photo by Martin Gavin)

"We're not treating our house like a cocoon anymore," she said.

Walter had his surgery in January 2008; Lina's procedure was conducted two months later. The work was performed by Norwood Hospital father-son physician team Arthur and Adam Glasgow, who have done hundreds of the minor operations.

Because both the Zuschlags met medical criteria, insurance paid most of their costs.

The laparoscopic procedure lasts about 45 minutes and involves installing an adjustable band that constricts the size of the stomach.

Those who have had the procedure feel full after eating only small amounts of food, causing them to eat less and gradually lose weight.

The operation is fully reversible.

The lap band isn't for everyone, Adam Glasgow said. The procedure is generally reserved for people who are seriously obese and have been unsuccessful in taking off pounds in any other way.

Patients need to come for follow-up visits, watch their food choices and separate food from beverage consumption to get the best results, he said.

Lap band surgery is getting increasing exposure as an alternative to yo-yo dieting and techniques such as gastric bypass surgery and liposuction.

The bands, which can be adjusted, can be left in the body permanently to help control eating and weight.

"It's permanent weight loss," said Walter, who hasn't put back any of the pounds he lost.

Both Walter and Lina had been heavy since childhood, and suffered the effects of teasing or being ignored by their peers.

"One of the reasons I never became that interested in sports is that I was always excluded," Walter said.

As adults, problems only multiplied. Travel was difficult and everyday chores were painful and inconvenient.

"If we'd go to the mall, we'd always wait for a parking space closest to the door because of the walking," Lina said.

Both tired easily, having little energy after work for anything more strenuous than watching TV. Walter even had trouble working on his antique car collection because it was difficult for him to get underneath the vehicles.

Both partners underwent exhaustive testing and orientation prior to having the surgery to make sure they were physically and psychologically suited for the life-changing procedure.

The couple say they have some minor restrictions on their eating habits, like avoiding dry foods and remembering not to drink fluids for two hours after a meal. But with a few distinct changes, the couple says they can enjoy most of the same foods and dining out as they have in the past.

"In the past, I might have wanted a whole pizza," Walter said. "Now, a slice is enough. We just eat less than we used to."