

THE HERALD

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Big obstacles? No problem

By Justin Parker

After battling scoliosis, Huntersville personal trainer Sarah Hart doesn't think changing bad eating habits is much of a challenge.

Sarah Hart's professional dream began with a senior psychology thesis at the University of North Carolina 15 years ago. She wanted to combine her psychology knowledge with personal training. She even had a business name picked out.

The Rhode Island native, now a Huntersville resident, wanted to start a business aimed at motivating individuals and families to live healthy, well-balanced lives. An All-American swimmer for the Tar Heels, she had seen the benefits of living healthy and wanted to pass her knowledge along to others.

Now, she's doing that on full-time basis through her company, Upgrade Lifestyle, Inc.

Hart insists that the services she offers are different than the average personal trainer. Instead of just working with an individual on a regular basis in the gym —she'll do that, too — she also provides a complete lifestyle evaluation. If the client wishes, she'll tag along to the grocery store and point out the positive and negative foods on each item. Or she will inspect a client's pantry for healthy foods. Whatever needs to be done, she'll do. Upgrade customers set goals for themselves — such as dropping pounds, building muscle mass or training for a marathon —and it's her job to help the client attain them by showing them how to create a well-balanced lifestyle.

Her business venture is more of a way of life. She has, for years, guided her friends and colleagues on living a healthy way. Now, she's just doing more of it.

“My goal is to get them to live that way as long as possible so that they never want to go back to the way they were before,” Hart says. “It's a total lifestyle change.



Sarah Hart's dream of being a full-time trainer is speed.

“It's changing people's lifestyle forever, not a quick fix.”

Hart was an NCAA All-American at UNC in sprint freestyle swim events and was a college teammate of her husband Greg, but of Ted Hautau, the head coach of Huntersville's FUEL Diving. She was a U.S. nat team member from 1989-1995 and participated in the 1992 Olympic Trials. All along, she stayed true to dream of starting Upgrade, but found dreams don't pay the bills. She worked as a loan officer and financial manager for a number of years.

Then in 2000, she underwent spinal fusion surgery, necessary because of increased pain caused by scoliosis (abnormal curvature of the spine). Doctors told her she should have been in a wheelchair. She had been diagnosed with scoliosis at the age of 12 and despite aggressive treatment through the years, her spine curved to 70 degrees in her upper back and 55 degrees in her lower back. Five discs and one-and-a-half ribs were removed from her body and her spine was fused together with a pair of 12-inch titanium rods, 11 screws and several wires. She had a six-month recovery period and didn't feel normal until about a year later.

Then she had children in back-to-back years. She constantly built her business in her mind and when her daughters reached the ages of five and four, Hart set out to start her business. She's been full-time since last spring.

“I might as well run with my dream,” she says.

Hart says the battle with scoliosis was tough, but it has shown her that obstacles can be cleared. She says obstacles can be anything from self-esteem issues to breaking bad eating habits or developing the work ethic to train regularly.

“Because of what I've overcome, I know so many people have (obstacles),” Hart says.

Hart is sponsored by the Huntersville Family Fitness and Aquatics Center and does much of her training at the five-year-old facility. But she will also open the doors of her at-home fitness room or train a client in their home if they desire more privacy. She incorporates swimming, running and workout equipment into her training. She is certified as a personal trainer and as a lifestyle and nutrition coach.

Once Upgrade clients reach their goals, they become members of Team Upgrade. Once a person is a Team Upgrade member, she asks that they participate in four fitness events a year of their choice. She provides with free Team Upgrade apparel and discounts to local businesses, including restaurants with healthy menu items.

Currently, there are 13 Team Upgrade members. Team members finished 1-2-3-4 in the HFFA's Harvest women's division. At the Thunder Road Marathon in Charlotte Dec. 9, Hart finished third in the women's division and Team Upgrade finished second in the Mixed Relay Division. And Hart won the “Bon Excellence Award” presented by Presbyterian Orthopedic Hospital, which honors perseverance for overcoming an orthopedic hindrance, while maintaining an active running lifestyle.