

PEOPLE

Fitting in

Personal trainer makes fitness accessible for every queer body

BY ERIC PLEMONS

Turning on the television or flipping through a magazine can be a serious hazard to your mental health. We are everywhere bombarded by messages about body shapes and sizes. We are reminded that we are not now—whatever that may mean for each of us—as attractive, healthy or fit as we could be.

Increasingly, consumers are coaxed toward herbal or chemical supplements, diet programs and large corporate gyms that dangle our potential thin and happy selves in front of us. Consider the heterocentrist, gender-normative and sizeist subtexts to these messages, and the sense of alienation among queers of size can become absolutely overwhelming.

That's where Maria Callahan comes in. Callahan is a trans-identified person of size who works as a personal trainer at Loprinzi's Gym in Southeast Portland. She became interested in personal fitness when she sought out a trainer four years ago. At 300 pounds, she wanted to lose weight in order to cope with an injury.

After losing 100 pounds in a year, her trainer hired her to work at the chain-store gym. "I am unique in my field," Callahan says. "There is a whole slough of politics to being an empowered person of size. Currently, there aren't very many trainers who have to think about that."

However, she quickly became disenchanted by the club's emphasis on company sales and body image deification over client health and wellness, which eventually drove her to the locally owned gym.

Callahan's goal is to provide access to fitness training for trans people and people of size. "It has been my impression that corporate gyms are for smaller, younger, fitter, straight people," she notes matter of factly. She works to break down

the barriers that keep large people from entering the stereotypical "gym culture."

She insists fitness is not about idealized body types or fat percentages. "Fitness is about quality of life and not being limited by your body. For a person of size, freedom may mean being able to fit comfortably in a plane seat and not having to avoid stairs. These things mean a lot."

In a culture that equates thinness and musculature with fitness, Callahan realizes it's difficult to communicate the notion that good health is a reachable goal for any body type. "The best thing I can do is set an example," she states. "I am a person of size, and I am fit and healthy."

And that's a big shift in attitude to what the genderqueer experienced at the corporate gym. Of 12 personal trainers there, eight smoked cigarettes to help suppress their appetite. Trainers were hired because of how they looked, in spite of their lack of certification or experience.

"The supplement and fitness industry is thievery," Callahan contends. "They don't want to help people become healthy, they want to sell them a product."

Callahan believes that her sincere and accessible approach to physical fitness makes all the difference to people whose relationship with their bodies keep them out of the gym. "Access can mean providing a unisex locker room. It is as easy as providing a treadmill rated above 200 pounds," she asserts. "It is vital that people experience a small series of successes rather than being confronted with things they cannot do."

Callahan is also not invested in establishing training programs to help fat people become thin people. "I want to teach people how to get in touch with their bodies. Exercise helps people get in touch. It has helped me get in touch with my body more than I ever thought I could."

Having chosen to move to a smaller, more community-oriented gym, Callahan has a strong understanding of what is missing from the fitness programs that many trainers employ. "Obesity has become a catch-all phrase to describe every ailment experienced by large people. But being sedentary is the real problem. I want people to exercise forever."

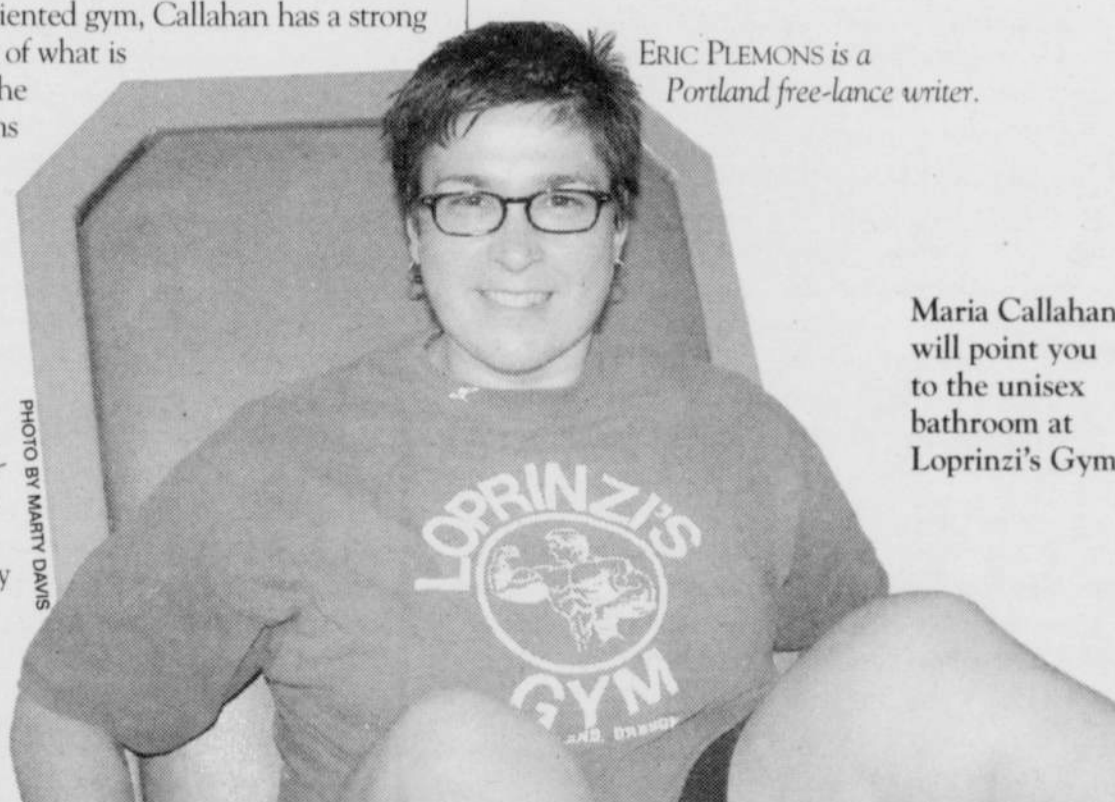
With the

knowledge of what it means to face the intimidating world of physical fitness in a body that is everywhere asked to disappear, Callahan is passionate about providing guidance in health and wellness to those who are overlooked by others in the "health" industry.

"It is a really amazing thing to be a part of the miracle of someone being in the body that they've always imagined for themselves. It's an inspiring thing. It keeps me doing my job. If you think you can't work out, before you give up, check with someone who sees miracles every day."

Loprinzi's Gym is at 2414 S.E. 41st Ave. MARIA CALLAHAN can be reached for consultation at 503-997-8716 or etheldiesel@msn.com.

ERIC PLEMONS is a Portland free-lance writer.



Maria Callahan will point you to the unisex bathroom at Loprinzi's Gym

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