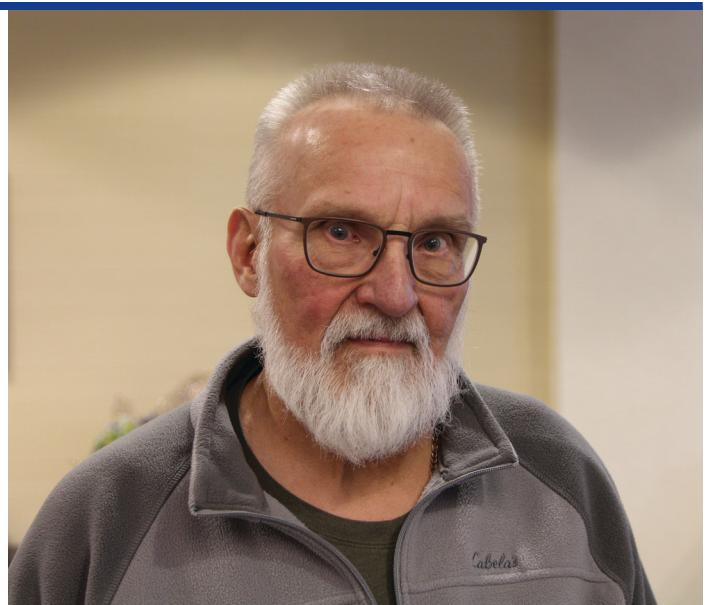




Keith Hietala



Ken Hietala

Open Book

Two Brothers Reclaiming Their Health

Keith Hietala is in Thunder Bay for a doctor's appointment, his brother Ken keeping him company for the drive from Marathon, ON. The two brothers have always been close, supporting each other throughout their respective health care journeys.

Keith explains, "I said to Ken, "You know, we're six years post-op, but we're still fighting the fact of being obese for so many years. Now I'm having to deal with vein issues in my legs."

Keith is referring to the bariatric surgery they both underwent for treatment of obesity and other weight-related issues.

The brothers struggled with their weight for years.

"If you look at my pictures over the years, every year, there is a little bit more weight," Keith recounts. "When I got into mining, I was known as the big guy on the job. I was strapping. But when I got to 515 lbs, it came to the point where you don't even know where to turn for help. The bariatric program is what saved us."

Both Keith and Ken grappled with numerous health problems due to their weight. "I had to go for an ultrasound for gallstones, and saw a doctor here in Thunder Bay," says Ken. "And being so large of a person, the doctor asked if I had ever thought about going into the bariatric program. When you are as big

as Keith and I were – at my highest I was 432 lbs – you are at the point that you are maxed out on the equipment that you can go through at the Hospital. One time, I had issues with my lungs, I actually had to go down to Toronto to get a scan done because I was too big for the machine."

"Keith and I can't say enough good things about the people here at TBRHSC," gushes Ken. "They were great to us."

Once the doctor brought up the bariatric program to Ken, and he started to seriously consider it, Keith decided to connect with his family physician in Marathon to talk about bariatric surgery.

"Bariatric surgery had been mentioned to me a few times by my own family physician. I had numerous bouts of cellulitis, severe sleep apnea, and I was on a BPAP machine – which pushes the air in and sucks the air out," Keith states. "So when Ken said he was going to go through with the surgery, I said, if one of us was going to get it done,

why not the both of us? We could do it together and be supportive of one another."

This was in 2015, when bariatric program at Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre (TBRHSC) Regional Bariatric Care Centre (RBCC) was in its infancy.

Keith explains, "At that point, we did our preliminary work in Thunder Bay. By the time we did our surgery, they [the Regional Bariatric Care Centre] retained the surgeons in Thunder Bay. Dr. Smith did some of my initial work, but because my BMI was so high, I was considered high risk, so my surgery was actually performed in Hamilton in December 2016. Ken's surgery was January of 2017. Follow up after surgery was all done through TBRHSC."

The TBRHSC Regional Bariatric Care Centre is a Bariatric Centre of Excellence, providing specialized treatment options for adults living with obesity and weight-related complications. It is an intraprofessional health care team that includes an internal medicine physician, psychologist, dietitians, bariatric surgeons, social worker, nurses and kinesiologist. The team works collaboratively to provide wrap-around care, including pre- and post-operative care, counseling and surgical services.

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“I interacted a lot with Sarah Miller, the registered dietitian,” adds Keith. “She always expressed, if you need anything, contact me. Whenever I had questions, or was looking for advice, she was always available.”

Sarah Miller, who is the Clinical Team Lead at RBCC, knows how hard navigating all the food and nutrition information available can be. “When I first started working as a registered dietitian in 2003, I met many patients who were frustrated by traditional approaches to weight loss,” she explains. “In most cases, despite their best efforts at weeding out toxic dieting culture and integrating public health messages, they continued to struggle with weight gain and their relationship to food and in many cases, declining health. It’s my job to interpret the science of nutrition into terms everyone can understand, in order to support

healthy living.”

Sarah is happy to answer her patients’ questions, and help them along the path to success.”

It’s very rewarding to see people living healthier lives and experience a better quality of life!” she exclaims.

Since the surgery, Keith has lost 305 lbs and Ken has lost 220 lbs. Quality of life, Keith and Ken agree, has improved immensely.

“I’ve often been asked how this has changed my life,” says Keith.

“Prior to surgery I was barely existing; now I am living! We are no longer house bound, we can socialize. This has given us a new lease on life.”

“Guaranteed,” Ken agrees. “We try to walk everyday (when it’s not -40). We keep active. We enjoy gardening, yard work. Healthy cooking, baking and meal planning. It’s all part of a post bariatric-surgery lifestyle.”

Keith chimes “We have three small rescue dogs - a.k.a. the fur kids - that keep us going!”

And for their part, the brothers are glad to share their story, hoping that it will inspire others to reclaim their health.

“I know others who have gone through the surgery, and they’ll just say, “I became more active” and won’t elaborate,” comments Keith. “I’ve been upfront about my journey since day one. That’s why I feel good about telling my story. I have nothing to hide. I had bariatric surgery. It was life changing

for both of us.”

“Keith and I are both an open book about having the surgery,” Ken adds.

“We were out at a wedding last summer, and somebody asked us about losing the weight. They had gone for the surgery and were having some issues, and we were able to help them with what to do and who to contact. If we can save somebody else’s life by telling them about what we’ve done, all the better.”

“Prior to going through the surgery I was on 14 different medications,” Keith continues. “Today, I’m only on three medications. Both of us were diabetic, on insulin four times a day. Our diabetes has been reversed and we are no longer on insulin. It’s given us back our lives.”

The brothers want to emphasize that the surgery is not the be-all end-all for weight loss.

Ken explains, “I tell everybody - you can go for the surgery, yes, and you will lose weight. With the surgery, you are given this tool to help you lose weight. But it is up to you to use this tool in the right way. You have to exercise, you have to watch what you eat, and you have got to keep active. It’s a lifestyle change.”

Keith agrees with his brother, adding that “If you want to be successful, the key is that you have to be willing to say, “Hey, my life as I knew it, has to change. Bariatric surgery is a tool that is getting me started, but I have to follow through if I’m going to be successful.”

The brothers emphasize that it’s all about putting your health as your priority. “Keith and I turned over a new leaf,” Ken asserts. “Anyone struggling with their weight - there is hope out there for you. But it’s up to you to get the ball rolling, and that is what Keith and I have done.”

Ready for a change? Talk to your health care provider about Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre Regional Bariatric Care Centre today. Our Hospital’s Regional Bariatric Care Centre offers treatment for obesity and obesity-related health conditions and tools for safe weight management and healthy lifestyle changes. If you are 18 years old or over, and ready to make a change, talk to your health care provider to see if you are eligible for treatment at the Regional Bariatric Care Centre. Visit our website for more information: bit.ly/TBRHSC-RBCC.