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The Ugliest Woman in the World, an Unlikely Hero

Lizzie Velasquez may not look like a traditional hero by anyone's standards. She's not muscular; she's not beautiful; she's not a police officer, fire fighter, or ruler of cities. She doesn't fit the mold of what a hero should be. She is, however, more heroic in many regards than the heroes immortalized in literature and glamorized in comic books. Lizzie Velasquez, who was born with an extremely rare condition that prevents her from gaining weight, has managed to turn her seemingly insurmountable life obstacles into opportunities for optimism and inspiration for others.

Born eight weeks premature, Velasquez weighed only two pounds and was never expected to crawl, walk, or talk. Doctors eventually diagnosed her with Marfan syndrome and lipodystrophy, two conditions that prevent her body from storing fat and gaining weight (Bever). Growing up, she underwent several surgeries to correct deformities caused by her complete absence of body fat. Because of her condition, she has been known to consume between 5,000 and 8,000 calories a day just to stay alive (Chan). At 26 years old, Velasquez is often mistaken as anorexic, weighing only 60 lbs. She is plagued with chronic health issues related to a weakened immune system and low bone density. Today, she is completely blind in one eye and partially blind in the other (Hartenstein). She also continues to deal with bone fractures caused by lack of cushioning in her feet (Hawkins). Having to live with such physical difficulties has the potential to wear down a person's spirit, but for Velasquez, it is an opportunity to prove to the

world that she, like many others with physical handicaps, is more than capable of living a full and rewarding life. On her personal website, she makes her decision to live life to its fullest quite clear. "Please don't feel like you have to treat me different just because I look different," she writes. "I was raised by my amazing parents to be a normal girl and not let anything stop me from what I set my mind to" (Hartenstein).

Physical complications are not the only struggles that Velasquez faces on a daily basis. Her engaging spirit and perpetual optimism have given her the strength to overcome a lifetime of bullying and a brush with self-loathing. In a 2013 TED Talk, Velasquez delivered in Austin, Texas, she recalls, "When I started kindergarten, I had no idea I looked different. I think of it as a big slap of reality for a 5-year-old" (Velasquez). As she progressed through school, she began to endure persistent bullying because of her appearance. In her autobiographical film *A Brave Heart: The Lizzie Velasquez Story* released in March of 2015, she recalls, "When I was a teenager I would look in the mirror and wish I could wash away my syndrome. I hated it because it caused so much pain in my life. Being a 13-year-old girl who is constantly picked on is unbearable" (Hawkins). Her physical differences and the reactions of others had begun to eat away at her self-esteem. Oddly enough, the incident that changed everything might have broken a weaker soul. At seventeen, she discovered a YouTube video with over four million views that deemed her as "the ugliest woman in the world." The comments following the video were nearly unbearable. Strangers declared that her parents should have killed her with fire, should have aborted her, that she would blind a passerby on the street (Hawkins). While the video and comments crushed her spirit, they also inspired her to confront her inner demons along with those who point and stare. "Instead of just sitting by and watching these people judge me, I'm

starting to want to go up to these people and introduce myself, or give them my card, and say, 'Maybe you should stop staring and start learning'" (Chan).

Despite her physical limitations and the lifetime of bullying, Lizzie Velasquez has proven to the world that she is both normal and inspirational. She has even found it in her to forgive the person who posted the YouTube video that changed her life. In fact, she started her own YouTube channel designed to inform and inspire. Her story has inspired others to stand up to bullies and speak up for themselves. "Going further, she has teamed up with Tina Meier whose daughter Megan took her own life after being bullied online, and together they are campaigning US Representatives of Congress to vote for the first federal anti-bullying bill. It would mean that all schools would have to start recording every instance of bullying and would be provided with funds to put towards anti-bullying efforts" (Hawkins).

Lizzie Velasquez began her life journey not expected to go very far. Instead of giving in to those expectations, she defied all odds and became a symbol of resilience and positive self-worth. Her ability to stand up for herself and against society's cruel definitions of beauty paves the way for a total shift in societal norms. She lives a normal life. She dates, she maintains a video blog, and she speaks publicly and candidly about her life obstacles. Perhaps one day, we can all look in the mirror and be proud of who we are, regardless of what others may say. "God made me the way I am for a reason and I would never change that. I lead a normal life as much as possible and deal with the bumps in the road as they come along with my head held high and a smile on my face!" (Bever) Her courage, her resilience, her tenacity, and her outlook make her a true, real-life hero.

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