

## **“Learning for Life” Bariatric Surgery Support Group:**

Growing up in Moorehead, Mississippi, James “Butch” Rosser, MD, was always a shining star – smart and driven, he graduated from high school early, attended college and gave up a promising football career to attend medical school. In addition to being a “bigger than life” personality, Butch actually was bigger than most. Always a chubby kid, Butch’s weight just kept increasing, so much so that in his forties, he weighed 450 pounds at 6 feet 5 inches. For his entire adult life, he was “nutritionally challenged” and was subjected to the last bastion of bigotry in this country: size discrimination. In spite of being one of the pioneers in laparoscopic surgery, he continued to encounter people in his career and personal life that held a bias against him because of his weight. Butch constantly felt something (other than just his extra pounds) weighing him down, because his weight limited his activities and happiness.

In 2001, having tried every diet imaginable to no avail and suffering from sleep apnea, knee problems, fatigue and poor quality of life, Dr. Rosser decided to undergo gastric bypass surgery (the procedure that involves reducing the size of the stomach and bypassing a portion of the intestine to decrease the absorption of food.) The procedure was performed laparoscopically through six tiny incisions, a surgical technique and approach that he had mastered and championed by training thousand of surgeons around the world. Two and a half years later (and 180 pounds lighter), Dr. Rosser is an attending laparoscopic bariatric surgeon and Director of the Advanced Medical Technology Institute at Beth Israel Medical Center in Manhattan.

**Because he underwent the procedure he performs, Butch sees patients from a unique vantage point and can empathize with a deeper understanding. He is able to talk about what the body feels like after surgery, is able to understand patients expectations and limitations, and is able to understand their fears in a different way than other doctors because his advice is based on both his own personal experience and his medical expertise. Recognizing the surgery is only the first step on a patient’s weight loss journey, Dr. Rosser has created the “Learning for Life” Bariatric Surgery Support Group at Beth Israel. Every two months, he produces a unique support group format that uses “edutainment” as an empowerment platform. His program seems more like the Oprah Show than medical follow-up, complete with opening monologue and skits, expert guest interviews to convey information, stimulating multimedia presentations and patient spotlights. “It is a two-hour teaching effort that taps into the emotional inspiration that is needed for a successful recovery,” says Dr. Rosser. Lead in a fun, interactive manner, the program is founded on the premise that “weight loss is for life” and is built around a “triangle of success” that includes psychosocial wellbeing, sound nutritional strategies and maintenance of a lifelong fitness program..**

According to Dr. Rosser, many patients aren’t being offered support groups that offer the knowledge essential to helping patients deal with a lifetime of trials and tribulations that are key to successful recovery. As a result, he is seeing more and more “weight loss refugees,” patients who are part of weight loss surgery programs that merely concentrate on the surgery and not as much on the after-care program. Butch knows, through first-hand experience, just how different life is after weight loss surgery. In addition to altering eating habits, increasing exercise and buying new clothes as they shed pounds, these patients have to deal with the emotional impact of fitting into the world around them in a different way. All this physical and emotional change can be daunting, so it’s important to seek out support that helps facilitate the changes and provide critical post-surgical health information. “Right now, we see the execution of a fire and forget posture,” says Rosser. “This trend must be reversed so patients can recover successfully and wholly.” As both patient and doctor, Dr. Rosser’s “Learning for Life” support program is helping others at the same time he’s helping himself.

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