

This Beauty Queen Was Compared To The Elephant Man Because Of A Condition She Could Not Control Or Cure



By Liana Jacob

MEET THE inspiring sports fanatic who was once called 'Elephant Girl' due to her swollen leg and admits to entering a beauty pageant just to 'fit in' – but she is now embracing her look and helping other women with body insecurities do the same.

Speaker and founder of Ninjas Fighting Lymphoedema Foundation, Amy Rivera (38), from Missouri, USA, was born with a condition called lymphoedema, a long-term chronic condition that causes swelling in the body's tissues.



AMY SHOWING HER LEGS AT THEIR MOST SWOLLEN. MDWFEATURES / AMY RIVERA

Growing up with this condition meant that the right side of her body was severely inflamed from her ears to her toes. Her appearance would attract cruel reactions and comments from her peers who would call her 'elephant girl', 'elephant leg' or 'girl with the big leg'.

At the age of 18, Amy entered into a beauty pageant to prove that she can fight against her bullies and won the title of Miss Junior America (Missouri) along with her very own tiara.

Despite this victory, for a decade, Amy would hide her leg under skirts and dresses to avoid the stares and comments. Amy was told by her doctors in 2012, before her official diagnosis, that she would be in a wheelchair by the time she was 35 and would never be an athlete.

After thorough research on her condition, she found a doctor who diagnosed her with lymphoedema in 2013, when she had a lymph node transfer and her first suction assisted protein lipectomies, which was unsuccessful.

By this point, Amy's right leg was 200 per cent larger than her left leg, so she went to another doctor who managed to successfully reduce the swelling through a procedure called Suction Assisted Protein Lipectomy. Her right leg is now only one percent larger than her left leg.



AMY PICTURED SHOWING OFF HER NEW THINNER LEG. MDWFEATURES / AMY RIVERA

In 2014 when one of her co-workers called herself 'fat', Amy felt it her duty to share her secret by lifting her skirt to show her big leg, in the hopes that it would make her colleague feel more comfortable in her own body. This was the first step to her fully embracing her big leg, accepting herself for the way she is and not apologising for her appearance.

She has since managed to participate in many sports such as; boxing, kickboxing, sky diving, weight lifting, yoga and is currently taking salsa dancing lessons.

"I was born with Lymphoedema; my entire right side of my body was swollen from my ears to my toes. The doctor's told my mother it was the way she carried me (which was not the case)," Amy said.



AMY PICTURED UNDERGOING A THERAPY TREATMENT CALLED LYMPHATOUCH. MDWFEATURES / AMY RIVERA

"The swelling went away everywhere except for my leg. My parents searched for answers but were told it was 'general swelling' and there was nothing we can do about it nor know what is causing it.

"I've never known life to be any other way than being stared at. I was callused to the comments and stares.

"People would call me the elephant leg, elephant girl, girl with the big leg. I punched a boy in the face at one point in time because he pointed at me and called me 'weird'.

"I had several others point at me in the school hallway. That was the turning point that I decided to find a new identity which is why I entered pageants.



AMY PICTURED DURING ONE OF HER FIRST BEAUTY PAGEANTS WHERE SHE WON THE MISS JUNIOR AMERICA (MISSOURI) TITLE. MDWFEATURES / AMY RIVERA

"In order to 'fit' in, I entered pageants and actually won – funny how that worked out, but it didn't really make me feel good about myself.

"I was still the 'girl with the big leg', just with a Miss Junior America (Missouri) title and a tiara. As an adult, someone at a local mall asked me if they could 'catch' what I had.

"I had a lymph node transfer in 2013 and two suction assisted protein lipectomies. However, the first procedure was unsuccessful, so I had to go to another doctor (Dr. Jay Granzow) who is the best to get the results I have now.

"My right leg was two-hundred percent larger than my left leg when I started this reduction journey and now my leg is one percent larger at this point."

Lymphoedema can affect any part of the body but mostly it develops in the arms or legs. It develops when the lymphatic system doesn't work properly.

According to the NHS, the lymphatic system is a network of channels and glands throughout the body that helps fight infection and remove excess fluid.

It can get progressively worse if it is not treated in a timely fashion. There are two types of lymphoedema; primary and secondary. Primary lymphoedema is caused by alterations in genes responsible for the development of the lymphatic system.



AMY PICTURED BOXING WITH HER SWOLLEN LEG WRAPPED IN BANDAGES. MDWFEATURES / AMY RIVERA

Secondary lymphoedema develops in people who previously had a normal lymphatic system that then becomes damaged.

Amy says that her co-worker's body insecurities helped motivate her to 'lead by example' by ditching the long skirts and dresses.

"I hid my lymphoedema from the world for well over a decade and one day I was talking with a co-worker who body shamed herself for being 'fat' and I immediately felt compelled to share my secret that I hid under the skirts and dresses," she said.

"I wanted her to feel comfortable in her own body but in order to do that I had to accept mine and lead by example. Once I did that, I embraced the title 'beauty queen with the big leg' ever since.



AMY PICTURED SKY-DIVING WITH HER SWOLLEN LEG. MDWFEATURES / AMY RIVERA

"I wouldn't trade my experiences for anything; I call my disease my blessing because I'm able to help others find their way out of the darkness and begin to heal and love themselves. I truly love myself and love that I have a calling to help heal others.

"I have always loved sports but couldn't participate in them as a child or teenager, so I decided to take charge of my life and do what I wanted. I was tired of not living.

"I love boxing, kickboxing, sky diving, weight lifting, yoga and I picked up a new interest in learning how to salsa dance now that I can.

"My leg has never been this small ever and my family and friends are just shocked; they stare with astonishment rather than with pity.

"I had the world against me in the beginning and even during my journey – today, they say 'I can't believe you did it'. I knew I could, and I wasn't going to allow the world to tell me I couldn't."