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## CHUNKY BUT FUNKY

**For black women, big and beautiful beats skinny and sickly every time.**

by  
Sarah Godfrey

**J**ennene Biggins is gushing over the perfect dress: a sleeveless, form-fitting, low-cut number in tan tissue linen. "I like this!" she says, grabbing it from its hanger. Unfortunately, it's available only up to a size 12. Disappointed, Biggins rummages through store racks until she finds the equivalent of the dream dress in her own size, 22. It is a tent-like job fashioned from coarsely woven, scratchy material with big white buttons down its front. Although it lacks a Hawaiian pattern and a gathered neckline, it is a modern-day version of the muumuu.

Biggins wouldn't be caught dead in a muumuu. The loud, A-line granny garment is a symbol of repression, she says, and reinforces the image of large women as "sloppy." Biggins, the founder of the Voluptuous Woman Co., or VWC, started her organization to empower women of size and battle stereotypes that paint them as unhappy overeaters who look frumpy and can't get a man. She has to set an example.

Today, on a late afternoon in April, Biggins wears an outfit that is decidedly anti-muumuu. She sports a trendy, J. Lo-inspired white-and-blue track suit, a sleek ponytail, diamond-encrusted rings and bracelets, and a fresh French manicure. Biggins, 37, calls herself and women like her "star-size," or "Star\*Size" to use her preferred rendering, because they are "big, beautiful, and bright." Star-size women, she believes, should embrace their large fabulousness by projecting an image of confidence—a fly hairdo, flawless makeup, and an outfit that accentuates curves.

But from the vantage point of the Women's World Department at the Hecht's in Westfield Shoppingtown Montgomery, crafting such an image seems a daunting task.

"Ooooh, that is uuugly," Biggins says, eyeing a shapeless white camp shirt decorated with polka dots. During her spin through the department, a blue-striped polyester shirt and a beige crocheted sweater with blue appliquéd flowers are deemed "uuugly" as well.

Biggins is particularly outraged by a tangerine-colored linen shirt with a printed border pattern of cut lemons and limes. "Now, they know—women aren't going to wear that!" she says. "Well, at least black women in D.C. aren't going to wear that. But then again, we are in

Montgomery Mall," she adds, alluding to the Bethesda shopping center's position as a bastion of well-heeled whiteness.

Like any mall, Montgomery has no shortage of cheap, trendy separates in large sizes—a vast improvement, Biggins says, over the selection of plus-sized wares only five to 10 years ago. Quality career clothing and formalwear above a size 14, however, are still hard to find. A down-market mall might have more options in these categories, but not at the level of quality Biggins believes professional women deserve. She deems suits at Ashley Stewart "cheap" and most attempts at evening attire too "hoochieish" for an upper-middle-class black woman in D.C.

Today, the particular item that Biggins has in mind is a suit. "Most of the suits you see for plus-size women make us look like a box," she says. This fact has led her to the decision to purchase "well-made" suits wholesale and offer them to VWC's clients through her Web site. So she's systematically making her way through the mall, checking out the competition.

As expected, there is little.

Hecht's has nice work separates in large sizes, and even a few suits, but they're not lined. "Plus-size women want lining," she says—it smoothes over lumps and camouflages bumps. At Lane Bryant, the manager rattles off a variety of reasons that one of the nation's largest plus-size retailer's stocks Capri pants and gauzy peasant tops, but no suits.

Nordstrom is her last hope. Biggins assumes that the Seattle-based department store, famed for its customer service and full range of sizes, will have at least a few decent plus-size suits. After scanning the "Encore" showroom in vain, Biggins asks the saleswoman in charge of the department for assistance. The woman, dressed in a bright blue sweater and crocheted skirt, rolls her eyes, signaling her disgust with the selection, and apologetically walks over to a smallish display rack with a few shapeless suits in a palette of drab colors—olive, brown, and gray.

As Biggins sighs and begins to head for the exit, she walks by Individualist, one of the store's nine departments for misses-size women. There are racks and racks of suits, in every color of the rainbow. There are still some cold-weather suits in gray wool, a few pastel spring suits, and plenty of no-nonsense classics in black and brown—with lining. Although the unsuccessful shopping trip means good things for Biggins' latest business venture, her mouth gapes at the disparity in selection. "Where is the funky stuff in my size?" she asks. "I can't believe this!"

Biggins is a sassy and outspoken woman of size. She models in fashion shows hosted by her organization and proudly sports her "Size Is Just a Number" T-shirt. When a waiter at a restaurant seats her in a cramped booth, she has no problem telling him she needs a table: "I don't want to eat my boobs for lunch!" And, unlike women who nibble lettuce leaves for sustenance, she eats a juicy burger and onion rings without apology once she is moved.

Biggins grew up as a "normal-sized" kid but began to put on weight while working two full-time jobs in the hotel industry in the late '80s. She blames the "constant access to food—good food" for her now plus-size frame. She started the VWC in 1997 after a friend's husband commented that she "dressed nicely—for a large woman."

Through her company, Biggins has discovered that counteracting negative images of plus-size women and helping them navigate the size-6 world is big business. Access to her Web site and newsletter are free, but she gets income from sales of a resource guide she put together in 1999 and tickets to her events.

Society constantly tells women like Biggins to slim down, for both valid reasons, such as improved health, and more superficial ones, such as aesthetics. Either way, she's having none of it. Historically, African-Americans have accepted, even celebrated, full-figured women, and Biggins' experience has been no different. Her family, her friends, and the black community in general have been supportive of her.

"African-American women are always hippy, have large derrières—the majority of us don't look emaciated," she says. "As a culture, we're used to that, and we're comfortable with that."

However, in recent years, the community's well-established acceptance of varied body types is beginning to give way to more Eurocentric standards. Young black women who were once somewhat sheltered from the impact of mainstream media images now have images of their own to deal with. There are a handful of highly visible plus-size black entertainers, but music videos and some African-American publications are increasingly eschewing "real" bodies for impossibly slender ones.

American society's obsession with thinness has always rattled the cheerleader and soccer-mom sets, who waste time counting the calories in Tic Tacs, or even ravaging their bodies with laxatives and diet drugs. And as black girls and women become more assimilated into the larger culture, they, too, are beginning to fall prey to this madness. A change in beauty aesthetic offers benefits—increased health consciousness not least among them—but the shift in ideals threatens to erase one advantage African-Americans have traditionally had over their white sisters: self-esteem.

"I don't think we'll ever see size-8 women eating, trying to gain weight because they want to be a size 14," says Biggins. "But we can change what people think about size and what people assume is beautiful."

**W**omen who are too skinny conjure up bad images and memories for African-Americans. Slaves were "skinny"; pipeheads are "skinny." Grandmothers and mothers are round and plump, as are well-fed babies, and women and men who cook and appreciate food. Being thin does not automatically mean being healthy, and being overweight doesn't necessarily mean being a walking heart attack. In fact, old-timers often refer to big men and women as merely "healthy." Round faces and bellies are characteristics of those who are cared-for and

loved.

Thin white women, on the other hand, seem to be constantly discussing fat. "Are you doing the Atkins diet?" "Do I look fat?" The fetish for counting calories and calling a pair of size-8 jeans "fat" jeans is unique to white women—and, increasingly, upper-class black women who have forgotten that bones actually look better with some meat on them.

In his comedy special *Bigger and Blacker*, comedian Chris Rock encapsulates the big black woman's worldview as follows: "We live in a society where nobody likes who the fuck they are. Everybody's on Prozac or some shit. Everybody's getting cosmetic surgery. Nobody likes who the fuck they are but fat black women. A fat black woman doesn't give a fuck what you think."

The bit might not be entirely flattering, but it speaks an important truth: African-American women, in large numbers, have failed or refused to conform to what many see as white standards of beauty. It's not that black women haven't grappled with their appearance—negative attitudes concerning hair texture, skin tone, and other "ethnic" attributes have been dissected by scholars ad nauseam. But weight has remained the one physical characteristic that black women haven't felt compelled to drastically alter just to fit in with the rest of society. Most would never make the pursuit of a smaller figure their life's goal.

"We've found that black women—and it's reflected in research—have positive body images," reports Leslie Curtis, of the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) Weight-control Information Network (WIN). "It could be partially bravado, because a lot of these surveys are self-reported, but based on medical literature, they do have positive body images."

Tracy Sbrocco, an associate professor in the Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, says that black Americans' embracing of fuller figures can be traced back to Africa. "In societies, cultures, countries where there is not a lot of food, being big doesn't happen easily," she says. "Being big is a sign of affluence."

Sbrocco adds that perceived durability for manual labor is also a factor, as she learned firsthand on a visit to her husband's hometown of Atlanta after having a baby six years ago. "I gained 25 pounds, and his two older aunts said, 'You look so good! You've plumped up!'" she says. "They said—and I've heard this from many older African-American women, particularly in the South—'You're healthy. You'd be good in the field now. You were no good the way you were. If an illness came along, you'd be the first to go.'"

Nedra De Lima, chair of the Capital Chapter of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), theorizes that the unattainability of some white beauty ideals, such as hair and eye color, has also helped black women escape the body-image trap. "I think in the black community, there's less pressure all around," says De Lima, who is of Hawaiian descent. "All the images that we see are of white women, and I think they're images of white women that aren't based in reality. White women have more pressure to look like those

women. Black women know they're never going to be blond and blue-eyed, and they also know they're not going to have a 22-inch waist."

Of course, not all white women are tortured by their bodies, and not all black women are happy with their size, be it a 2 or a 26. Yet, the NIH *2002 Women of Color Health Data Book* cites a study that reports in 1999, among racial groups of adolescent girls, young African-American females were the least likely to report that they felt overweight—only 32 percent, compared with 42 percent and 36 percent of Hispanic and white females, respectively—even though that group had a higher percentage of overweight girls than any other.

"I admire that confidence, and it's so much healthier than what white women are doing," Sbrocco says. "Medical professionals are trying to impose standards in the name of health, but psychologically, black women are so much healthier. Motivate them to improve their health, not how they look, because it hasn't worked for white women. They're overweight, too, and at a higher risk for developing eating disorders."

Although minority rates of eating disorders are widely believed to be underreported, James Gray, a professor and director of clinical training in the Department of Psychology at American University, says that black women do seem largely to have beaten that particular curse. "African-American women have, at least until recently, been protected from eating disorders," Gray says. "They have lower incidences of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa than whites."

He hastens to add, however: "But that's not true of obesity. It is rampant in all groups, but more prevalent in African-Americans. From my research, I've found that it takes more weight before black women feel dissatisfied with their bodies. They can be somewhat overweight and still be OK with that. If a woman is already overweight and is OK with that, it's fine from a social and cosmetic perspective—but there are health risks involved.

"The psychological disorder with the highest mortality rate is anorexia," Gray continues, "but there are probably a hundred obese people for every anorexic."

"Sixty-eight percent of African-American women are overweight—we're up there with Hawaiian women, Native American women, and Mexican-American women," says Dr. Patricia Davidson, a cardiologist practicing in D.C. "It's an epidemic."

That figure, which is corroborated by NIH statistics, was calculated according to demographic data for body mass index (BMI), a medical formula determined by the ratio of height and weight. People who qualify as "overweight," and particularly "obese," on the BMI scale are at higher risk of developing diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and even cancer.

And African-Americans, because comparatively more of them are overweight, are more susceptible to weight-related diseases than other groups. According to Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention figures, in 2001, 31.1 percent of American blacks were obese, and 11.2 percent were diabetic—numbers that are nearly twice those of whites. The American Heart Association reports that African-Americans are at greater risk for cardiovascular disease and stroke deaths than Caucasians—in 2000, cardiovascular disease accounted for 40.6 percent of deaths among African-American women.

Of course, many of these statistics can be directly related to social class—African-Americans are more likely to be poor than whites. Inadequate or no health insurance coverage, less education about healthy diets and exercise programs, and the abundance of affordable but high-fat foods in middle- and lower-class neighborhoods are all considered factors in the health disparity.

Being overweight has mental-health implications, as well. The correlation between obesity and depression is well-documented in women of all races. Despite the bravado that large black women frequently display, the NIH *2002 Women of Color Health Data Book* says that among overweight African-American women, increased weight corresponds with increased risk of depression.

Davidson notes that being overweight or obese is often a symptom of depression, adding that black society's uncritical acceptance of excess weight can be akin to turning a blind eye to deeper issues. "We're talking about a very strong, law-abiding, Christian community, where food is a legal, socially acceptable addiction," she says. "Girls in dangerous neighborhoods use weight as protection. Black girls in more affluent neighborhoods are unhappy—they don't fit into society, and they don't fit the image of the women around them, so food is their comfort."

And now, to compound this danger, 20 years into the MTV era, countervailing forces are bearing down on black girls and women. The deeply ingrained idea that being plump is just as good as, if not better than, being svelte is giving way to conflicting standards—especially among young, affluent black women. "There are still different beauty ideals by ethnicity," says Sbrocco. "But a lot of black women are moving towards this thin ideal—which concerns me."

Despite the popularity of such personalities as Queen Latifah, Star Jones, and Mo'Nique, black media images, in general, are beginning to catch up with white ones. Hip-hop videos, with their half-naked women, in particular, expose black girls to unrealistic ideas about looks.

"For African-American girls, it's videos," says Biggins. "At this point, if you're not light-skinned, and a size 2 with long hair, you begin to look at these women like, *If I don't look like them, I won't be accepted. The boys won't like me—or, The men won't like me.* It's sad."

Greg Alan Williams, an actor, author, and educator who is co-writing a book, *Courage to Love: Loving and Celebrating the Star\*Size Woman*, with Biggins, says that the many advancements blacks have made in such areas as education and employment have come at a

cost.

"We're not the social model that we once were," he says. "African-Americans still deal with these issues to a lesser degree, but as we become more and more a part of the mainstream, as we become more successful, there is more pressure to conform to EuroVeian standards. We're now more susceptible to the angst experienced by other groups."

"I don't think African-American women—in particular, African-American star-size women—are as confident as we make them out to be," Williams continues. "In terms of self-image, how they feel about themselves can be very much masked. But when you run into a truly confident star-size woman, watch out. Because she's hell on wheels."

**T**he indoor swimming area at the Best Western Maryland Inn in Laurel is a mock oasis in the middle of a maze of identically decorated guest rooms. The pool and adjacent hot tub are visible from many of the cookie-cutter suites so that those who grow tired of watching TV can choose instead to watch the bathing beauties below from their windows. Today, on a Saturday afternoon in April, members of the Capital Chapter of NAAFA provide the view.

When one NAAFA member frets that the position of the swimming pool gives guests in the rooms a full view of "fat women" in their bathing suits, another yells out "Good! It'll give them the thrill of their lives!" while stripping down to a shimmering bikini.

NAAFA uses the word "fat" often, reclaiming the pejorative to give it a positive meaning. "'Fat' is not a four-letter word," reads organizational literature. "It is an adjective like short, tall, thin, or blonde. While society has given it a derogatory meaning, we find that identifying ourselves as 'fat' is an important step in casting off the shame we have been taught to feel about our bodies."

The "fat" women at the pool party, who are 200, 300, and 400 pounds, parade around in their bathing suits—one-pieces with and without skirts, tankinis, skimpy bikinis. Everyone here is either fat or a "fat admirer." There is no one to stare, point, laugh, or otherwise put the NAAFA members in a vulnerable position.

The 15 or so women here are mostly in the 35-to-50 age range and mostly white. Unlike many of their thinner counterparts, who believe that body type can be controlled and not doing so is a profound failure, they've largely stopped trying to whittle their figures with diet and exercise and have accepted themselves as they are.

Food isn't a focal point of NAAFA events—too many dinners and lunches would reinforce the stereotype that all fat people are gluttons—but there is some talk of homemade fudge that one woman has brought to share. There are more important things to discuss—husbands, kids, jobs, and where all of those fabulous swimsuits were purchased.

As the women dip painted toes into the pool to test the water's temperature, soak in the steamy hot tub, and gather around tables to talk, they are ogled by the 10 or so guys in

attendance. One by one, egged on by winks and calls of "Come on over, honey!" from the women, the men wander over to the hot tub and wait their turn to sit among the ladies.

"As you can see, many of the women here are very confident and secure," says De Lima, who organized the event. "But still, many of them might not feel comfortable walking into a regular club. We make sure that all of our events are [Americans With Disabilities Act]–accessible and that we have seating that is comfortable for very large people. There is always someone just like you, and no one is sniggling or giggling."

And, of course, the presence of tongue-lolling men lounging on chaises and soaking in the hot tub doesn't hurt confidence levels. Never let it be said that women's entire sense of self comes from attention from the opposite sex, but feeling attractive and desirable can't be bad.

Although most of the women here are white, the majority of the men in attendance are black. The women don't see this as coincidence. "Black men are more accepting," says De Lima. "There's none of that 'You need to lose a few pounds.'"

Deborah Harper, 45, who is white, is at the event with her boyfriend of 20 months, Anthony Mickey. Harper says she thinks that black men are most receptive to "supersize" women. "To be fair, it depends on the individual," she says. "But if you put 10 black men and 10 white men in a room, nine out of the 10 black guys will flirt with me, and only one out of the 10 white guys will."

Mickey, 44, says he's always had a preference for large women, and doesn't see it as a big deal. "In black, Jamaican, and Latin cultures, there is a very strong preference, and it has always been mine," he says. "I've never had anyone make a comment when I was with a woman in public, but I have seen a few drooling. But if they did say something, I wouldn't care. I can't control what people think."

Biggins believes that of course one of the reasons that black women of size feel comfortable in their bodies is that black men appreciate them. "Men—and what their preference is—have 80 percent to do with it," she says. "Our men like us this way—they don't want a skinny woman. At all. I would think that Caucasian men look at size and prefer a smaller woman."

And apparently white women have picked up on this fact—at many NAAFA and other social events for large people, there is a predominance of white women and black men. "You see a lot of large white women with black significant others," Biggins says. "Because our men like that—their men don't."

The NAAFA pajama party later in the evening draws a better crowd than the pool party—about 50. The women revel in the attention from the black men, and the handful of white men, who have come to mingle. Dressed in sexy peignoir sets and dapper smoking jackets, the revelers grind to EU's "Da Butt," or kiss and slow-dance when less raucous tunes are thrown on. From a couple dressed in identical dollar-sign pajamas to a woman in a "Fat Chicks Rule" nightshirt and her beau, the majority of the couples are interracial—black men

with white women.

Where are the black women?

There are some at this event, but De Lima admits it has been hard to diversify. "Our attendance is 40 percent nonwhite—it just doesn't appear that way," De Lima says. "A lot of black women have come and said that we're fun and they have a great time, and others have said that they just didn't feel there were enough other black women to bond with."

Regina Washington, 44, is the treasurer of the Capital Chapter of NAAFA and concedes that she is often the only African-American at NAAFA social gatherings. "We don't have a big turnout of African-American women," she says. "I've heard a lot of general things—there aren't enough other black women here, or there aren't enough men here," she says.

Furthermore, Washington notes, "It's our culture. I think we're just raised to love ourselves more." And the resulting confidence has made it difficult for her and De Lima to recruit black women in their age group, many of whom simply don't see fat as an issue.

"I'm going to be 50. Most of the people here are 35-plus," De Lima says. "Twenty-one-year-olds may want to hang out with people their own age." And her own peers usually possess enough confidence to go out to regular nightclubs.

"When you go to a black club, and a big woman comes in, she's not wearing a tent. She is wearing something nice," De Lima says. "Everything shows—she looks wonderful. You can see in the way she stands and she smiles: that she's proud of herself, and she knows people are attracted to her."

**T**he Curves gym on Idaho Avenue in Cleveland Park is filled with women of all races, shapes, and sizes. Black and white, Asian and Latino women; women old, young, and both large and lithe. Workout centers such as Bally Total Fitness and Gold's Gym attempt to attract young hardbodies seeking to become even harder through commercials with flashy music and unitard-wearing beauties, but Curves is after a different demographic.

The advertisements for the national chain of women's fitness centers, launched in 1992, show women of all ages, races, and sizes with "real" bodies dancing, wearing flouncy dresses, gabbing with friends, walking along a beach. The tag line for the commercials: "The Power to Amaze Yourself."

The Cleveland Park Curves seems to hew pretty closely to the company's message of fitness for all. Here, the rainbow coalition of women is bound together by a common goal: to sweat it out during their 30-minute workouts on a variety of hydraulic fitness machines. There is chatter about children and taxes, along with the piped-in music and an automated voice that tells the women to "change stations now" every 30 seconds or so.

Franchise owner Elvi Moore, who was general director of the Washington Ballet for 16

years, says that the reason her branch of Curves packs in all sorts of different women is the trend toward overall fitness rather than trying to reach some unattainable goal. "Most everyone wants to be healthier and more fit, regardless of size," Moore says. "Looking like a model is not the thought now."

Curves' soft-sell approach has yielded an undeniable financial success—the company was ranked second on *Entrepreneur* magazine's 2003 list of the top 500 franchise opportunities. The *Guinness Book of World Records* named it the world's largest fitness-center franchise in 2001, when its outlets numbered 2,221.

Curves bills itself as a fitness and weight-loss center, and the program does have a diet component, but Moore says that she "hasn't pushed it yet." The chain has received criticism from gym rats for not offering a rigorous enough workout, but that's kind of the point. The goal is to get women off of the couch, not onto the pages of *Shape*.

Programs like Curves' represent a crucial midpoint between a John Basedow-type fitness regime and a completely sedentary lifestyle. Removing the intimidation factor from exercise is particularly helpful for black women, especially those of a certain age, who dismiss working out as something only "white people do."

For such women, showing too much interest in fitness immediately establishes a connection with the stereotypical white woman who talks incessantly about going to the gym, shopping at the health-food store, and drinking vegetable juice. And it's hard to argue that people who would voluntarily trade Popeyes for Whole Foods and willingly walk on a big machine that goes nowhere are in full possession of their faculties.

WIN, which distributes literature on health and fitness to people across the country, has gone head to head with such thinking and discovered that forceful moves to get black women to change their exercise and eating habits can often backfire. It is difficult to convince someone that she needs to lose weight when you can't prey on feelings of inadequacy and shame. Instead, through a series of brochures targeting black women called "Sisters Together: Move More, Eat Better," WIN attempts to gently cajole women into fitness regimens, rather than beating them over the head.

When WIN conducted focus groups prior to preparing its materials, it gathered concrete evidence to support this approach. "In one of our focus groups, we asked women about getting up and moving from being completely inactive," says WIN director Curtis.

"The impetus was usually feeling uncomfortable or having a husband or loved one make a comment," Curtis continues. "But feeling unattractive—we didn't get that. One woman in the group was 220 pounds, and she had an incredible, positive body image.... We knew we didn't want to write things to tear that down. We make suggestions—'If you think you need to lose weight, try this.'"

Curtis acknowledges, however, that this laid-back method of encouraging black women to

slim down doesn't necessarily provide the motivation by itself. "We're different from other organizations and publications, because we're not telling people what to do," she says. "We're presenting them with information once they get out of the contemplation stage. Other publications may more aggressively push them from the contemplation to the action phase."

Dr. Davidson is a fan of the more aggressive approach. Sitting in her office munching an apple, she speaks about the epidemic of obesity, and the evils of "the food industry," with the zeal of a drug czar. Davidson doesn't blame overweight people for their condition—she believes that the industry and its advertisements have successfully manipulated them into an addiction to food.

Of course, that addiction is no more damaging than the eating disorders many whites suffer from. Davidson doesn't want the problems at the opposite end of the spectrum to creep into the African-American community. But in some respects, the culture can't change fast enough for her.

"It's accepted in the black community," she says. "The same month the *New England Journal of Medicine* declares fat an epidemic, *Ebony* magazine prints, 'If You've Got It, Flaunt It,' with Star Jones on the cover. It was about all the movie stars and celebrities that are overweight. It's a very dangerous concept that we have accepted, because it's such a disease-inducing state."

"Women are really frustrated," she continues. "That's why gastric-bypass [surgery] is on the rise. Once they admit to themselves how frustrated they are, they go straight to the surgeon. So, they can tell themselves for 10 years that 'I like this, I want to flaunt it, I look great,' and look at the few actresses who are doing great and feel good—for the moment."

Davidson concedes that the woman who comes into her office crying and desperately wanting bariatric surgery is worse off than the woman who says, "I'll eat what I want, and I still look good" in terms of mental health, but she still wants to see black women lower their risks for disease.

"People should feel good about themselves—they shouldn't have to have low self-esteem. But the reality is that I look at it from a health perspective. I don't want anyone to feel bad about themselves, but I also don't want people to contract diseases that they could have prevented."

Biggins, for her part, believes that the self-esteem of plus-size women isn't fleeting, and, in fact, can actually boost her chance for exercising. She says that her level of confidence is part of what drives her to wake up at 7 every morning to train for an upcoming Avon Walk for Breast Cancer in New York. "It goes back to feeling good about yourself," she says. "If you feel good, you're going to want to exercise."

"There are health issues with large women, but people think that if you're large you're going to die any minute, and that if you're skinny, you're in perfect health—which is not true," says

Biggins. "There are plus-size women who are very active. It could be their body frame—they're not small. We're not all meant to be the same size—that's just a fact."

Sbrocco agrees that the death sentence attached to people of size can be exaggerated and believes that the positive body image of black women should be used as an example. "The negative is, 70 percent of black women are overweight or obese. That's not OK—that's a health issue," she says. "But we can't tell black women that they should feel guilty because they're comfortable. The opposite should happen. We should learn from those women who feel good about their appearance and have a multidimensional beauty ideal."

**A**t Biggins' Landover, Md., apartment, the new clothing arm of the VWC is cranked up and ready to go. At the center of her cream-colored living room is an enormous garment rack filled with plus-size clothing. There are linen separates, fine coats crafted from patterned Chinese silk, and filmy blouses in psychedelic patterns. Biggins also has jewelry—sterling-silver bracelets designed to fit large wrists, pendant and matching earring sets, and even chokers that don't actually choke the wearer.

And, of course, there is a collection of the coveted plus-size suits to rival even the Individualist department.

While showing off her new line, Biggins pops in a tape of an old VWC fashion show. On the stage behind the catwalk is the company logo, which Biggins affectionately calls "my big girl"—an outline of a large woman's figure with the words "Size Is Just a Number" printed across her chest.

As the show begins, the MC for the evening steps to the podium and announces, "Tonight, the voluptuous women are here to say 'We can do it, too!'" The lights are dimmed for a moment, and when they're turned back up, out comes the long procession of Biggins' star-size models, who sashay down the runway in lingerie, form-fitting black suits and colorful hats, and evening wear.

The stand-out of the show is a woman in her mid-30s who struts down the runway in a full-length mink coat and, upon reaching the end of her walk, opens it to reveal a fire-engine-red teddy. There is a little roll of flesh around her midsection, and her arms and legs jiggle a bit when she walks, but she strides confidently, head held high, executing spins and turns that a woman half her size might perform at a show for Ralph Lauren or Donna Karan.

The woman on the tape would, by most standards, be considered fat. She may even be obese according to the BMI chart. But she's not homebound, or unable to climb a flight of stairs, or gasping for air. By black cultural standards, she's merely "healthy" or "pleasingly plump." And at the fashion show, she's just another haughty, over-the-top model who is giving her best Naomi Campbell to the crowd.

"She is something else," says Biggins, laughing at the tape. "She is very confident with herself—she never cares what anybody thinks of her."

The amply built lingerie model is representative of an element of African-American culture that is worth holding onto. As American culture becomes more heterogeneous, and as more opportunities open up for young black women, they will inevitably absorb mainstream values about how they should look and how much they should weigh. But achievement should not come at the cost of diminished self-esteem.

Although balanced, sensible diets and exercise for overall improved health are lifestyle changes that black women should embrace, being fat and loving oneself is still preferable to being thin and miserable. Black women have never needed special-interest groups to counteract marginalization or find peers to socialize with, because in black women's eyes, carrying around excess weight hasn't meant that one can't dance all night at a nightclub, find a suitable mate, or even tromp down a runway in a fur coat and G-string.

Just because black women have their sights set on occupying corner offices and managing stock portfolios doesn't mean that they have to adopt a specific physique or a self-loathing attitude in order to fit in with those already at the top. Like respect for one's elders, like African-American cuisine or music, good feeling about one's body is a piece of black culture that should be retained in changing times.

"No woman is 100 percent happy with her body," says Biggins. "Even women who we think are perfect, like Halle Berry or Tyra Banks, may not be happy with themselves. But it's about self-esteem. You can't allow yourself to become brainwashed or ever think that you're not worthy." **CP**

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