

**Nicole Davis' Presentation at "Food Justice, Fat Activism, and Body Politics"
on February 25, 2015 at New College**

*****Trigger warning: self-harm, cursing, violent disordered eating habits.*****

The man in the video says, "Those fat f---s just need to learn self-control. They need more willpower."

Willpower looks like an eating disorder.

Willpower looks like me staying inside in my room all day so I won't have to look at food so I won't want to eat it.

Willpower looks like my tummy screaming at me when my cousins pass around fresh guacamole and chips and my heart falls a little bit and I have to leave the room.

Willpower looks like I made it through the day empty and I'm proud of myself and I suck on a lemon wedge while my family eats dinner. My reward is my stomach roaring empty with self-satisfaction.

Self-control looks like I can control time, make the calories eat themselves back up, scarf down as many 100-calorie snack packs, two hundred, three hundred calorie snack packs, if I upchuck down john back in time go my thighs.

Self-control sounds like gagging.

Self-control smells like porcelain and s--- and bile and stale mini chocolate chips kind of f----d a lime and yelled at me together for taking part in this experiment with the only body I will ever be.

Self-control feels like acid burning my body open stinging my eyes closed boiling me alive inside out. Self-control goes ploppoopoploooooop ouuuuuut ahhhh, my throat screaming, my eyes streaming, and I'm not done 'til I can't make any more come out.

I was a chubby kid. I felt chubby. I was small and round and I felt wrong.

In fourth grade at summer camp, I started cutting myself with plastic knives because I thought I deserved to feel pain because I couldn't make myself look skinny.

Then scissors. Staples. Nail clippers. Anything I could do to make myself hurt. I would bang my head against the wall, stupid, stupid, why can't you eat less?

In seventh grade, my best friend showed me how to throw up in the bathroom outside the lunchroom where our friends would hang out. I remember exiting the stall, eyes stinging, wiping my face and smiling, satisfied, as they looked on in horror. They were jealous, I thought. I'm going to be skinny.

More scissors, more vomit. All the time, now. Almost every day, whenever I could get away with it.

Throw my sandwiches away cause I couldn't look at them.

Go home and eat small, then everyone's asleep, sneak out my room, pull a chair up to stand and reach the cupboard, stuff my mouth with as much peanut butter as I can.

Scissors. Staples under the desk in class. Stupid, stupid you'll never be skinny.

I'm on a 900 calorie a day diet. The one Elizabeth Hurley did after her baby. I'm on a lemon detox diet. I'm only drinking apple cider and olive oil today. It is disgusting.

I throw up at school. After school. Self-control.

My stomach hates me, though. It protrudes and pouts like a stubborn child. "Give me, give me," and I'm like, "Get me out," but "give me, give me," she says, and every day after school I put on 21 Jump Street and eat pudding packs, carefully. 100 calories only. 200. Three. I'm measuring myself. I can control myself. God, I want more pudding, I want satisfaction, I want my mom not to say to me one more time, "Do you NEED to eat that?" because I NEED to stuff more down my face, I need a place to cry about this, 'cause all the notebooks in my room are full with "stupid, stupid," and blood stains and tears, 'cause I'm a seventh grade, eighth grade, ninth grade girl and I hate myself, and didn't we all?

I went vegan when I read a book called *Skinny Bitch*. I thought it was a diet book. It taught me the horrors of factory farming and the USDA and Coca Cola and raping pigs, slaughtering souls in the name of our comfort. I was scared sh-tless and haven't eaten an animal since.

I am grateful for that book; I put together the interconnectedness of our food system. The multiplicity of crossings we went the wrong way on in the forks on the road to PROGRESS. I thought about animals in a whole new way, my kin, not just my dinner. And I began to see other people, the world, differently. People all around me, dinner for someone else's comfort. Other souls slaughtered in the name of PROGRESS and DEMOCRACY. I began to understand the world around me as an interconnected ecosystem with moving parts, the suffering of others needlessly caught in them and powering my middle-class New York City lifestyle.

This all made so much sense, and I began to preach the vegan gospel. The food justice gospel. The save the environment, Gaia gospel. But I still threw up. I still looked at myself naked in the mirror and pinched my sides 'til they went numb and I preached myself the gospel of loathing. And, I'm afraid, too many of you in the audience know this song by heart.

Fast forward five years, and I no longer throw up. Rewind a few months and I couldn't say that. I would tell people to love themselves, each other, but I couldn't fathom ever not LOATHING myself. Honestly, I have to thank a myriad of Equity [Studies] courses, Katie LeBesco readings, and *It Gets Fatter* for finally helping me connect, not only the suffering in our food system and suffering in our society, the way we place that suffering within ourselves. Really, truly understanding that fat does not equate with unhealthy or bad or immoral took a lot of unlearning for me. And a lot of unlearning what I had in the past five years of veganism and food justice activism, because even in these progressive movements for equality, we are hiding

systemic failure behind rhetoric of fat-phobia. Shaming and blaming fat people, individuals, for the food system that fails us all. This idea of self-control is so twisted and short-sighted, and incredibly violent. It is, by definition, exclusory. It excludes the fact that everyone is born into a different body, it excludes marginalized communities by asking, “How can we make our individual selves thinner?” (because the answer, according to Michael Pollan, is spending 50% more on our grocery bills!), rather than asking, “How can we make nutritious food equally accessible to everyone in our society?” and how to address the barriers that are preventing this.

I come into this talk recognizing my privilege as a small cisgendered white settler. I do think it's important not to minimize the problem of eating disorders in relation to other social justice issues, especially knowing first-hand how this can allow oneself to justify self-harm; however, it is imperative we connect the dots between middle class white girls purging themselves and racialized communities not having access to fresh produce. Our food system is broken. Our food system is filled with bingeing and purging and starving and violence. Our relationship with food is broken. It is of the utmost importance to draw those connections, because by working to get at the root of our food systems crisis, we can build alliances amongst all sorts of different communities working towards social justice. And there is no room for exclusion, and individualism, and body shaming in any effective social justice movement.

I want a food movement that is radically inclusive, asking, “How can we help each other? How can we make sure marginalized voices are prioritized and heard? How can we make sure the people at the forefront of this movement are not preaching ‘willpower’ and ‘self-control’ and loathing and shaming?”

How can we be supportive of everyone with every kind of body and capacity level? It is vital that we ask those questions, especially in the food justice movement, if we are to create any sort of tangible change. There should be no room for violent, individualistic terms like “self-control” and “willpower” in the food movement. What we need are words encouraging us all to work together, to actively work to make sure people from all marginalized communities, people with all different abilities and capacity levels, and body types, are represented and heard in the food justice movement.

All this talk of “working together” may sound corny, but that's important, 'cause corn, you know what, corn needs its sisters, beans and squash, to grow and flourish—and we need each other—not exclusion—to flourish. To create a paradigm shift. To move past this violent capitalist food system and create a truly just and equitable one.