

Michelle Bender

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\$5,000 WINNER Walmart Supercenter #123 Seminole, OK

In 1985, my son, Ryan, died of leukemia — he was two and a half. I still relive the moment when they told us they could do no more for him, then the ride home from the hospital. I can see the dashboard of the car, and what I saw out of the window. I was holding Ryan on my lap. I was only 22.

I was blessed with another child, my son Asher, who is transgender.

In school, I knew there was something going on because he felt like a boy and acted like a boy. It was so difficult and I felt like I had failed. But I finally sat down with him and said, "Did I do something wrong?" And he said, "No, it's just how I feel." And I accepted who he really is: he's Asher. We went through the whole transition together and Asher blossomed into a wonderful, handsome man. He's 36 and I couldn't be more proud of him. I went full circle. I lost a son, my daughter was born, and I got a son back. But I also went through a divorce and I've had a lot of challenges.

I'm 59 and married to my second husband, Ed. But I've been feeling depressed.

We're so happy together, but Ed has cancer, and I was stressed. I was eating fast food, and big bowls of cereal before bed. I was in pain, I had high blood pressure, and I weighed 261 pounds. There was no joy in my life. In December 2021, I broke my elbow and said to myself, "I can't keep doing this." I knew I had to change.

Last May I had weight loss surgery.

It was a struggle staying positive, and I downloaded the Thrive app for support. My first big step was drinking more water. I'm cooking and eating vegetables. For dinner, I'll make grilled chicken or baked filets of cod. My favorite meal is steak with green beans and a side salad.

Moving is easier, I can walk without being afraid I'll fall.

The excess weight made me off balance. I walk a lot for my job and as the weight came off, I felt more confident and my balance improved. At home I use my stationary bike. I've lost 80 pounds, I have more energy, and less depression.

I love the Meditative Story podcasts on the Thrive app.

I listen to them every night and I find them so uplifting. And I do breathing and meditation exercises and Resets which help me to calm down when I'm stressed.



I read to relax.

I enjoyed The Vampire Chronicles by Anne Rice. I'm also interested in books about the afterlife, like One Proof of Heaven by Eben Alexander. I'm very curious about what happens when we die because of losing my first son.

Ed and I are spending quality time together.

He owns a thrift shop as a hobby, reselling antiques. We sell everything from vases to athletic equipment and clothing, and I help him. We're always looking for knick knacks at Goodwill stores and yard sales. We also like watching classic T.V. shows like "Matlock" and "Leave it to Beaver."

At work I have more patience.

There was a coach at work I wasn't getting along with, so I just decided to be nice and friendly, saying "hi" and asking him how he's doing. And he actually started smiling. We're laughing together, our communication is so much better, and I feel better.

I'm not in pain anymore.

My doctor's excited and says my blood pressure's perfect, and I've come off a lot of the medications I used to take for rheumatoid arthritis.

Asher and I are so close.

He's so supportive, and anytime I'm down I'll give him a call. During the summer we have pool parties with Asher and his wife Lauren. We play music and swim. There couldn't be two better people on this earth than my Asher and my Lauren. I just pray the world will accept people for who they are.

I don't take anything for granted — I love my life and have so much gratitude.

One minute you're here and the next you're not. We're blessed to have the people we love in our life for as long as we have them. I'm healing and I know Ryan is with my mom and dad, and he's happy. He's having a blast.



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