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Charting a New Course

Navy veteran and single mom Michelle James tackles the ups and downs of type 1 diabetes with true grit.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY
PHOTO KEITH LANPHER



When Navy sailor Michelle James started feeling exhausted and thirsty in 2005, the then-22-year-old chalked up her symptoms to new-mom overwhelm. Not only had she recently given birth to her son, Corey, but she had also been transferred from Florida to Virginia, to prepare for sea duty. “I had no family nearby to help and I was trying to find my way to a new normal. Of course I felt exhausted all the time.”

Still, James’ symptoms—sleeping a lot, thirst, losing weight, lots of running to the bathroom—nagged at her. “I was talking to some medics at work one day and something made me ask, What are the signs of diabetes?” The possibility was not out of the question. Type 2 diabetes ran in her family, and while pregnant, James had been diagnosed with gestational diabetes. (She had been given the all-clear after delivery.)

The medics encouraged her to go get checked out. “When I got to the clinic, doctors there tested my blood sugar and said I was at 500 [mg/dL],” she recalls. They transferred her to a Navy hospital, where she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, prescribed insulin, and taught how to give herself injections.

Several months later, she received devastating news: Her diagnosis required she be medically discharged. “In the Navy, you spend months at sea. The vessels only keep insulin aboard for emergencies, not for diabetes management,” James says she felt, “Totally cast aside. I had had my whole future mapped out. I had made rank quickly. My goal was to become an officer. I was on that path.”

A NEW START

James was steadied by her strong belief in herself. “I was born in Trinidad and Tobago, raised in Grenada, and came to the United States as a teenager,” she says. Even in childhood, “I always knew I was going places. I was going to accomplish something.” That faith got James through a few difficult years after being discharged. “I had to find myself again.” She tried out a series of jobs—at a bank and the post office, then through temp gigs. “I needed to find something that would let me juggle all my responsibilities as a single mom of a busy toddler.” Eventually she found work she enjoyed: working for a civilian defense contracting company. With money set aside from the GI Bill and lots of determination, she spent long nights getting her college degree and then her MBA,

determined to move up the ranks. “I was working full time, going to school full time. I was calling on friends to babysit so I could make it to my night classes. There were four years in there I didn’t sleep,” she laughs.

Along the way, one thing got easier: her diabetes treatment. In 2007, she started using a Medtronic insulin pump and continuous glucose monitor. “It’s been a great improvement. It gives me immediate feedback to keep my blood sugar in a healthy range.”

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Despite her professional and personal successes, in 2017 James started to feel down and frustrated. “I was in a funk,” she says. While in high school and in the military, she had been a serious athlete, running track competitively. But during the years of building her career, fitness had taken a back seat. “I kept telling myself that I didn’t need to work out. I had diabetes—I didn’t want to overexert. I have always been on the slim side, so I didn’t have my weight to motivate me. And being from the Caribbean, if it is cold, I am not going outside.” The then-35-year-old had tried to get back to a regular routine over the years but nothing stuck. “I had signed up for gym memberships over the years but they didn’t work for me. With a child at home and working full time, I didn’t want to have to leave the house again at the end of the day to go work out.”

Then a friend suggested she try Beachbody on Demand, an online library of workout programs. “I could just roll out of bed and work out in my living room,” she says. She started a subscription and, after a few weeks, she was hooked. “I did different programs so it didn’t get boring—cardio, strength training, yoga—working out five or six days a week.” The boost in mood she experienced motivated her to keep going. “Now I feel like my day has not started without that workout to get my endorphins going. I’m more energized throughout the day and it’s great stress relief.” One sometimes-workout buddy: her son, Corey, now 15. “He will join me if I’m doing weightlifting. When I did a ballet barre program, he was like, ‘Yeah, I’m not doing that,’” she laughs.

Seeing the payoff from her exercise efforts, James was inspired to tweak her diet too. She started making an effort to eat more veggies. “I always keep bell peppers, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, and baby carrots around. [Now,] after

What Works for Michelle

DRINK UP “A lot of times you think you are hungry when you are actually thirsty. I try to drink 100 ounces a day of water or sparkling water. I always keep a water bottle at my desk as a visual reminder to keep sipping.”

MONITOR YOUR EFFORTS

“I love my Apple Watch. Seeing how many calories I am burning in real time when I exercise motivates me to push harder.”

GIVE THANKS “I write in a gratitude journal—I’m grateful it’s Friday. I’m grateful for this pump that is keeping me alive. It keeps the hard stuff in perspective.”

eating them for so long, it’s what my taste buds crave. I can do so many things with them—eat them with hummus as a snack or make a whole meal of them by adding a protein like tuna or chicken.” One thing she doesn’t do: Whip up a whole different meal for her son. “In the Caribbean, we live with extended family. If you don’t eat what’s served, you don’t eat at all.” James makes a point to occasionally indulge her “foodie” side too. “If I decide it’s a pizza day, I’m going to have real pizza. It’s not going to be the cauliflower crust kind. I will just adjust my insulin and move on.”

FINDING COMMUNITY

In 2018, she started sharing her life through her Instagram account @fit_type1_naviechic. “When I was first diagnosed, there wasn’t social media. But it’s been a great way to find a community of support. You are not alone. Sometimes I post about fitness, sometimes about my hair. It’s just me living my life.” Along with posts of her now-buff self in workout clothes, she keeps it real too: “I’ll post if my blood sugar kept me up at night and the next day I’m wiped out.”

Above all, James is inspiring others with the same grit that has brought her through the big challenges in her own life. “My goal is to show people: Yes, I am a single mom. Yes, I am a homeowner. Yes, I have a career. And yes, I have diabetes—but I don’t let the disease define me. You don’t have to either.”