

My body significantly changed when I became pregnant 7 whole years ago. I was an underweight college girl, loving my freedom and having a lot of fun. I was always tall and lean, but I also did not eat nearly enough starting around my Senior year of high school and into college. I was never great at taking care of myself and still struggle with it today, but I'll elaborate more on that later.

So, when my happy accident (aka my son) happened, I blew up. From my face to my arms, my feet, thighs, boobs and my belly was especially huge, cute and round and full of baby, but huge. Stretch marks were inevitable; I started noticing dark red creases on my thighs and creeping up my belly as if my skin were going to tear open completely. I had purchased an extra-long, bendable belly button ring (more like a rod) for pregnancy specifically but that was an epic failure because my belly button got so tight with the expansion of my stomach, I thought at one point it was just going to burst through my piercing. The spot where I once had a cute dangly piece of jewelry is now a partially closed hole that somehow stretched up where I have an almost perfect "X" over and across my once 'normal' belly button. I've thought; X marks the spot where the treasure was buried, but my X only showed up after it was unburied (more like expelled). It wasn't until after my boy was born that I noticed the thin, ripple marks also in between my thighs as I couldn't see as far as my big toes let alone anything going on under my giant basketball belly.



(This is the most exposed photo I have posted online since having my son; Nov. 2024)

I did bounce back quickly. I am very active and genetically lean as mentioned before but because I was breastfeeding, I was ensuring I was eating enough and maintaining a healthy diet as I was still using my body to provide for my little. As I mentioned before, I have not been

great at taking care of myself; I've done lots of work and come very far in learning how to love myself enough to fully care for me. I have learned a lot and still learning. I don't believe in an end to our personal growth. My lack of self-care is focused primarily on my deep seeded need to take care of others before myself. Around my senior year I got into my first serious relationship with a wonderful human, Emily, now transitioned to Emmitt. This was also the first time I saw a different side of my mother; one that was disappointed and in denial of my choices. My attention and validation were entirely sought after from my partner and friends. I have since discovered more causes to my fear of abandonment and need to ensure the happiness of the people in my life because if I thought they were mad at me or disappointed it would crush me. So, when it came to eating, getting enough sleep, and later, especially when I first became a mom, not doing anything for myself just because it felt good or made me happy. Something in my head told me it was unproductive, or I should be doing something else to keep everyone else happy.

I have since learned I can't fill from an empty cup and when I slowly started doing more and more things for my own self-care it was amazing how much more I was able to give to everyone else. My wonderful kid has helped a lot with that because he tests all my limits but also shows me love like I have never felt and being my best for him is so important. I also recognize the importance of showing him what self-love looks like; I will always tell him how amazing, smart, handsome, funny and deserving of love and confidence in himself he is, but it is also my job to teach him how to believe those things about himself, too and he won't learn if I don't lead by example.

Since I had my son, I have never shown below the scars of my belly button in public. I only buy one-piece or high-waisted bathing suits and don't get me started about finding a top that supports my stretched out breasts. I've always loved clothes and having a unique style, but it had never been a challenge, until then, to find clothes where I didn't like how my body looked in it. Sure, things would be too big or too small, but it didn't really go further than that; If I liked a piece of clothing and it looked like it would fit, I would get it without even needing to try it on.

I use jokes to talk about my insecurities such as that the skin on my stomach is like Freddy Krueger's face or my boobs sag like two long socks holding tennis balls. Funny, yes, but these insecurities have been emotionally challenging to deal with. My jeans are always high-waisted, and must cover my bellybutton, shirts and dresses are never low cut or backless because going without a bra is not an option and I have tried every "ultra-supportive, extra lift, backless, magic, shape-enhancing, re-usable, never-buy-another-bra-ever, adhesive, top-rated bra" stores and websites have to offer.

I decided to make art out of my stretch marks; I have considered getting a tattoo over them, but I have never been certain of how it would look, nor have I considered what, if anything, would be a combined form of my body and art that I would feel confident enough to show off. Tracing the lines and filling in the spaces in between made me feel like I was making repairs to a ripped piece of clothing or, more so, painting over a piece I didn't like to begin painting a better one. I love my tattoos and feel more confident when I get to show them off, so it almost felt natural to have more art on my skin and feeling like I didn't want to hide it. I got to see the shapes and where they spread more clearly, some of them making forms like lightning, others like branches. I feel closer to comfortability and the acceptance of my stripes.

