

Time Has Come For Natural Shapes

by Ann Gerhardt, MD August 2012

A 14-year-old girl from Maine has succeeded where whole organizations of adults have failed. She and over 84,000 online followers have elicited a promise from Seventeen Magazine to stop airbrushing models' bodies. Ballet dancer Julia Bluhm started the online petition in April and by May the magazine's editor-in-chief, Ann Shoket, agreed to a "Body Peace Treaty."

Julia (rightly) felt that extreme Photo-shopping young models' bodies created body images that led to eating disorders in some of her friends. She asked the teen magazine to show just one airbrushed photo spread a month, feeling that, "If we make ourselves heard about how important Photoshop is and how much of an effect it has on girls, they'll become more aware."

Problem is, teen and women's magazines have been "aware" for years. Scientific studies have repeatedly confirmed that rail-thin models contribute to eating disorders. If nothing else, circumstantial evidence is very strong: In the 1960s Twiggy ushered in the change in average models' size from 10% to 30-40% less than the average American female. By 1980 we had an anorexia nervosa and bulimia epidemic.

It's not like the magazines haven't been asked to change before. Back in the early 1990's, Boycott Anorexic Marketing (BAM) tried similar petitions to no avail. The organization that I and five eating disorder patients founded in 1994, We Insist on Natural Shapes (WINS), fired salvos of letters to numerous magazines, and got only one "Sorry" letter in response. No magazine was then willing to risk circulation numbers to prevent starvation deaths in young women.

Apparently the time has come, and the huge number of online signatories made an impact. While Seventeen Magazine has admitted no wrong, their "Body Peace Treaty" promises to never change the shape of a girls' body or face, to use as models real girls who are healthy regardless of clothing size, and to publish before and

after photos on their Tumblr page when modifications are made. Their editors will continue to airbrush away stray hairs, clothing folds and skin blemishes. Seventeen now has a "Reader Model Open Call", in which they choose one girl, hopefully who looks 'normal' to appear per issue.

Seventeen unfortunately is just the tip of the iceberg. Huge numbers of women's magazines continue to use impossibly tall, coat-hanger-like models and airbrush them to hide their inevitable bone protrusions, rib shadows and anemic skin. They can't admit that women, with tummy fat, non-silicone breasts and a bulge at the top of the inner thigh, are normal and healthy if they don't look like pre-pubescent males.

The National Eating Disorders Association sees Seventeen's commitment as a first step. Many more magazines need to sign on to change before the mind-set of "never too thin" goes the way of the dinosaur.

Seventeen's Beauty Peace Project asks girls to vow to...

- Stop using the word **ugly** to describe my appearance - the more I say it, the more I convince myself that it's true. (It's not!)
- Post photos of **women** around my room I admire for what they've done (kick-a** sports stars, singers who rock), and not necessarily what they look like. It will help keep me focused on what's *really* important.
- Play around with new **beauty tricks** to find out the best looks for my face or my hair type.
- When I'm having a "**bad beauty day**" (my hair is greasy, my acne feels out of control), I'll use my favorite go-to lip gloss or spritz on my favorite perfume to feel better, instead of letting it ruin my whole day.
- Look at pictures of **my mom and grandmother** at my age. When I can see the beauty in others like me, it's easier to see my own.
- Resolve to simply say thank you when I receive a **compliment** about my looks, instead of thinking I don't deserve it. (I do!)
- Embrace the things about my face that make me **unique** (accept the mole, love the eye color, be nice to the nose!) because the world is a better place when not everyone looks exactly the same.

- Surround myself with positive people I admire for their kindness, courage, confidence - that's real beauty.
- Stop spending hours in front of the mirror focusing on what I don't like. Because the most beautiful things about me are what come from inside - the **sparkle in my eyes** and the **warmth in my smile**.

Author's note: I'd leave out the fourth suggestion and replace with: On a day I feel less than beautiful, I'll go spend time with a friend who likes me for who I am. Seventeen lifted this list from innumerable such lists from the 1980s and 1990s. The way to self-esteem hasn't changed, just who espouses it.¶