**Yira’s Testimonial about the National Fitness Challenge**

 We’ve all heard the benefits of exercise. We have heard that exercise helps with energy, balance and one of the most obvious benefits of exercise is weight loss. I bet though that most of you have not heard that exercise helps with mental health and over all well-being. It’s been amazing for me to read the stories of all of the participants of the national fitness challenge and how just stepping it up has changed their lives. Well, here is my story.

 My world turned upside down in the year 2015 when my husband announced that he didn’t want to be married to me anymore. This announcement came to me like a bucket of ice dropped on my unsuspecting head. I thought everything was fine and then all at once I was moving out of my home and staring at my divorce papers. My world as I knew it had changed completely and I was a devastating mess.

 One fateful Saturday morning I was making a Facebook post about an accessible kindle app for the iPhone that would be voiceover friendly. Sue Buckley from Club Vibes made a comment on my Facebook post about joining a fitness challenge using donated fit bits. I immediately dismissed the comment and moved on with my day to day activities which might I add did not include fitness much less a so called challenge with a bunch of people I didn’t know. However, God had other plans.

 My cousin Andrea read the comments on my post and started chatting with me on messenger. She told me to call Sue and join the challenge. I tried my best to ignore her messages but it became apparent that she was not giving up until I answered. I told her that I would call Sue and left it at that. Later on that morning I contacted Sue and we talked for an hour. I poured out my heart to her and she understood me like no other. She listened to my problems and once again extended the invitation to the national fitness challenge. I had been trying to become active but I always made excuses not to do it. After much prompting from my cousin and an understanding talk with Sue I decided that I had nothing to loos if I joined. I also decided that I had to make Sue and my cousin shut up about it so why not please them and join. I didn’t anticipate that I would have a way to get to Knoxville for the walks or even that day to get my Fitbit. All of these challenges seemed like such a daunting task so I prayed hard for God’s will to be done in this situation and he provided.

 God provided transportation for me to go pick up my Fitbit by allowing my uncle to take me to Sue’s house to pick it up. He provided transportation to the walks by putting my sidekick Tori who lives in the Sevierville area. He provided a team of dedicated steppers who keep me on my toes. He provided Sue who is the head of our group and who doesn’t believe in our petty excuses. God provided coach Missy who is amazing and creative in helping even the worst couch potato to get up and move.

 When my marriage fell apart in February of 2015 I became extremely depressed. Getting out of bed was a chore. Exhaustion was like another ghost limb and suicidal thoughts were a part of my life more than ever. I prayed for God to take me home with him because my suffering was way too hard to bear. I asked God one night that if he didn’t take my suffering away that he should take me home. Last May, I remember sitting in my room writing in my journal thinking of taking every pill in the house and end my life once and for all. Then God spoke to me through my writing and told me that my life was not mine to take but his to keep. I thought of my sweet mother in the next room, of my little nephews and my friends. At that moment I once again gave my life to God and put the bottles back in the drawer.

 Having my Fitbit has changed my life in many ways. First, it has giving me a tangible way of tracking my steps. Second, it has provided me with accountability because all of my team can see my steps and I’m never one to disappoint. Third, it has giving me the desire to walk on my treadmill which has helped me tremendously with my anxiety and depression. When I feel that my mind won’t quiet down I get on the treadmill, put on a good movie on Netflix and walk until my mind has settled and my thoughts are no longer unhealthy. When circumstances get the best of me and depression tries to rear its ugly head I put on a good comedy and walk on the treadmill.

 In April I walked my first 5k with Tory and her lovable service dog Chief. Our timing was under an hour and we had great fun in the process. Since joining the fitness challenge I have also started attending an anxiety and depression peer support group in my area. This group has provided support and a soft place to fall when life gets hard. With this group I also go hiking and hang around nature. This has helped me greatly in my healing from divorce, anxiety and depression because when I am with nature I see God’s creation in its full glory and splendor. I see his hand in the beautiful waterfalls, the cool of mountain air and the company of friends who are more like family. In nature I remember why I’m blessed and leave my problems behind. God has also provided an awesome case worker from Hellen Ross Mcnab who keeps me centered and helps me cross the unending lines of paperwork, bureaucracy, fear and doubt that are an inevitable part of recovery from mental illness and divorce.

 I’m still a work in progress. I still have some bad days. However, unlike last May when suicide and depression were a part of me, I now know that there is a practical solution to the challenges I face. I know that I can reach out to coach Missy and tell her that things are hard and that moving is not in my schedule. I know that she will promptly encourage me to move. I am no longer alone because God has provided me with a team of individuals just like me who walk in order to be fit and to compete for our goals. I also have a support group that addresses my mental illness and understands what I face. I also have my sidekick Tory who walks with me in my area when we can’t make the group walks and who gladly provides transportation to the group walks and other club activities. I am thankful to God for providing all of this and much more. I now walk far as I smile and celebrate recovery.

 I have a few goals still to accomplish. First, I want to loos about 20 to 30 pounds. Second, I want to live independently and be a contributing member of society. Third, I want to finish my master’s in professional counseling. I want to make a difference in the lives of individuals who are going through the same issues that I’ve faced. I believe that God has allowed me to face defeat in order to purify me and make me shine so I can be used by Him to shine like gold in the lives of others.

 I have a few tips for all of you who face divorce, laziness or fear of exercise and mental illness. First, come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s been through it all and he knows what it’s like to struggle. He will give you hope where there’s no hope to be found. It is because of God’s hand on me that I’m alive.

 Second, if you are a believer come to your Knees. Talk to Jesus like a friend and know that he truly hears you. You don’t have to use fancy language or colorful words. He understands you and he will meet you where you are. Read his word and seek him first in your life. Join a bible study or church where you can find the love of Jesus shown in full display.

 Third, move! If you don’t feel like you can walk long distances then walk around your house or dance to your favorite music. If you don’t feel that you’re any good at dancing then do it when you’re alone or close your bedroom door and don’t worry because nobody can see you. You can’t frown or cry if you’re dancing and you can’t feel depressed when your favorite music is playing. Choose your exercise because it doesn’t matter what you do as long as you move. What works for me might not work for you.

 Fourth, join a support group. A support group will provide you with accountability and friendly competition. The 13 teams subscribed to this challenge are competing to step it up each day. I am competing with club Vibes each day and supporting my team in every step I take. In my mental health support group I am provided with a soft place to fall and an understanding that what I go through with my depression and anxiety is not abnormal or weird. At church I am blessed to have people who love me unconditionally and listen to me when I need to talk. If you have mental illness do not isolate yourself!

 Fifth, blindness or disability is not an excuse! There are 13 teams all over the country made up of blind or legally blind people who have all kinds of other limitations. Do not limit yourself by your physical, mental or any other disability. God did not give us a spirit of fear but a spirit of confidence and hope. Hold on to hope, take baby steps and do the impossible.