

She was told to look more like the 'Little Mermaid.' Years later, she still weighs food.

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Sarah Daniels has a routine. Most days, she plans what she'll eat and makes sure it doesn't surpass about 1,200 calories.

Shortly after Thanksgiving in 2017, she made a slow cooker full of chicken and rice soup in her New York apartment. She weighed the ingredients individually and then weighed the meal when it was finished so she could divide it into 10 lunches.

In the middle of all the weighing, Daniel's food scale broke. And that meant she wouldn't be able to eat. And it happened right before the video game enthusiast was supposed to be a guest on a podcast about Destiny, the game she often plays for thousands of fans on Twitch.

She cried. She called her mom. Adrienne Daniels offered to buy her a new one as her daughter fiddled with the buttons to bring it back to life.

The incident is stuck in Sarah Daniels' mind when she considers how much she wants to feel thin enough in her 5-foot-1-inch frame. She measures her waist each morning and bemoans her height. She tells herself that if she were taller, she wouldn't feel stout.

The struggle is an outlier when measured against the rest of her accomplishments. Daniels, 29, is a successful gamer and musical-theater actor. She's starring as Sandy in "Grease" at Beef & Boards Dinner Theatre, which runs Thursday through March 31.

Daniels has been in the same battle with her food and body for the past seven years, she said, ever since two people on Disney's casting team told her that her silhouette didn't match the Little Mermaid princess Ariel's.

'You sound amazing ... but there's an issue'

Daniels had strutted into the Disney theater full of confidence for her final approval. At age 22, she'd won the role of Ariel, her first performance as a singing actor, in the "Voyage of the Little Mermaid" show. Now she had to sing on a rock in costume, which for that day was a pair of makeshift shells and tights under the princess's signature fin.

"People who were above the creative team of the show sat me down (and said), 'OK, so you

sound amazing, you're so great, but there's an issue," said Daniels, who now lives in Bergen County, New Jersey. "They said, 'Well, your silhouette doesn't quite match Ariel's.' I was like, 'Can you be more specific?' "

They told Daniels she needed to match the character herself, who would be shown in movie clips on the screen behind her during the performance, she said.

"They said, 'Well, we just think you need to maybe tone up your stomach because you just don't match her silhouette,' " Daniels said.

On top of the comments, Daniels said someone on the tech team overheard and told others involved in the production who weren't in the room at the time.

"I mean, I went in. It was the first time, I think, in my life when I stood up for myself," she said. "And I was like, 'You're out of your mind. ... You're telling a 22-year-old woman who weighs 115 pounds (that) she needs to lose weight to look like a princess?' "

Walt Disney World Communications did not respond to multiple requests for comment from IndyStar about the incident.

Food and her appearance had never been an issue before, according to Daniels and her mother. She grew up eating most anything her mom fixed even as she dealt with bouts of ulcerative colitis. She'd been acting, singing and dancing for years, and no one had mentioned anything about her figure.

Daniels, who's from Celebration, Florida, decided she wanted to be in the movies at age 3 — the same year she asked her mom for an agent. Adrienne Daniels said that wasn't going to happen, but she found ways for her daughter to work toward her dream. The little girl danced and visited the Walt Disney World Resort parks as often as possible — an easy feat since it was practically in the Daniels' backyard.

At home, Sarah Daniels listened to "Les Miserables" nonstop. When she was 12, she landed a spot touring in with VStar Entertainment Group's "Bear in the Big Blue House Live." She refined her acting skills in community theater and, as a teenager, by playing characters and princesses who waved to guests and chatted.

Playing Ariel, with her rambunctious and driven spirit, occupied the big place in the actor's heart.

"When she found out that she (won the audition), she ran down the stairs and she was screaming when she got the phone call from Disney," Adrienne Daniels said. "I thought she had hurt herself, but she had just gotten the part of Ariel, and she was so excited. I've never seen her that excited."

But after the final approval, Sarah Daniels walked out the Disney theater to her Volvo, sobbing. She called her mom. She was upset enough that she worried she wouldn't be able to drive safely, so she just sat in her car for a long time.

Admitting an issue is scary

Sarah Daniels ate small bites for a few days before trying a cleanse with lemon juice, cayenne pepper and maple syrup. Disney approved her to play Ariel after a relook a few weeks later, she said.

"She was obsessed about eating and exercising, and she didn't think about anything else until she actually got approved for the show," her mother said.

She had taken photos of her daughter as Ariel, and Sarah Daniels saw defined ab muscles in them. But it didn't matter. She said she no longer saw herself as she actually was in the mirror, especially from her thighs to her stomach.

Her dad, who is a psychologist, has talked with her about it. But Daniels hasn't booked an appointment to see another professional yet. Between working and getting married, the actor's life has been busy. And, she said, admitting an issue is scary.

"Dissatisfaction with your body — shape, size, what it looks like — is either body dysmorphia or an eating disorder. If the concern is specifically with shape and weight and it involves eating, then that's an eating disorder," said Dr. Jonathan Richardson, who is a psychologist specializing in eating disorders at the eating disorders clinic at IU Health.

People who have body dysmorphia and eating disorders can often identify a turning point, Richardson said. He has not treated Sarah Daniels.

Research shows that humans magnify what we're afraid we might see, he said. Just as people with spider phobias think spiders are larger than they are, people who fear fat on their torsos tend to see it, whereas others who aren't worried about it don't, he said.

For Daniels, gone were the chicken fingers and fries she loved during her tour with "Bear in the Big Blue House Live." She dropped 15 pounds from her 115-pound frame and at one point, by eating mostly spinach and avocados, she fell another four to 96. At that point, her ulcerative colitis — a chronic disease that can cause inflammation in the colon's lining — kicked in. Daniels has had colitis since she was about 15.

All food goes on a scale

The actor has tried to stabilize herself on a diet that's between 1,000 and 1,200 calories per day. She'll often go for a half cup of cereal or oatmeal with unsweetened almond milk and

coffee in the morning. Nutrisystem's white cheddar macaroni and cheese is for lunch. A small pizza or portion of grilled chicken followed by a cookie for dinner. Two snacks in between meals.

"When I went to the Nutrisystem site, I said, 'This is how much I weigh. This is how much I want to weigh,' " Daniels said. The site said, 'You can't do that; that's too small.' I had to put in random numbers so they would allow me to do the program."

Everything — even the creamer she has in her coffee and the vegetables she eats for dinner — is weighed on her scale. Daniels tries to balance obtaining enough nutrients with maintaining her weight at 100 pounds. But sometimes, she said, the actor will scarf down a family-size bag of chips in one sitting and cry afterward.

Daniels loves restaurants that list the calories on the menu. She and her husband, Skye Scott, frequent Chili's, where she'll order the Margarita Grilled Chicken and broccoli. Or she'll eat grilled catfish and green beans with her parents at Cracker Barrel.

Occasionally, like on her honeymoon and on a cheat day at her and her husband's favorite New York restaurant Quality Italian Steakhouse, Daniels will eat without counting. And then she'll diet back to 100 pounds.

While Daniels obsesses over calorie counting and exercising, she doesn't make it a daily topic with her family. Her mother didn't realize her daughter's issue until two years after the Disney incident, when she saw her pull out the food scale in her New York apartment.

Scott didn't notice his wife's regimen until they moved in together a few years ago. If Daniels eats after a certain time at night or doesn't like the numbers on the scale each morning, it affects her entire day. It didn't stand out to him as a major issue, he said, because it's the norm for actors.

"I'd say most everyone I know in the entertainment industry deals with some sort of image issue or lots of eating disorders," said Scott, a professional musical-theater actor who grew up in Warsaw, Indiana.

Sounding like a Disney princess

Daniels' resume shows her adeptness at storytelling on stage. When she's performing, her mother said, her daughter lights up with a special energy. Aside from her Disney work, she's played Sophie in regional productions of "Mamma Mia!", a young Elsa in "Frozen" at Disneyland and was part of Investigation Discovery's "Real Sins," which told true-crime stories.

In New York auditions for Sandy at Beef & Boards, Daniels stood out to casting director Eddie Curry among 30 blonde actors who fit the same type.

"Sarah has this confidence about her that is in no way obnoxious," Curry said. "By the end of the show, that's where Sandy ends up. So that stuck out to me."

She never stepped out of character, even during vocally challenging parts of "Grease's" lyrics, Curry said.

Likewise, Daniels' voice captured her husband the first time he saw her in "Mamma Mia!"

"Her voice sounds exactly how you would imagine the most pure Disney princess would sound," he said.

Curry, the casting director, said he uses the iconic foundation for a show. For "Grease," that means hair color factors in for the main characters, though with other shows he aims to cast nontraditionally. Regardless, he wants real-looking people on stage.

"I can tell you that we would never say to an actor, 'You need to lose weight to play this role,'" Curry said. "That would be crossing an unforgivable line."

Daniels remembers the compliments she gets. Producers at Investigation Discovery, for example, told her she looked great when she had to wear tiny shorts and a tube top for a scene, she said.

Richardson, the psychologist, said studies have shown that people in appearance-focused sports like gymnastics and figure skating have more issues with eating disorders. Anecdotally, he has seen the same types of concerns with people who perform for a living, he said.

Despite the "silhouette" incident with Disney's parks sector, Daniels said she finds Disney on Broadway to be more inclusive, appearance-wise. "Frozen" recently cast a woman, Ryann Redmond, as Olaf in a break with the previous gender choice for the role. The show also is one of several that have cast black actors in roles that have traditionally gone to white performers.

"With Disney, it wasn't the company as a whole who did that to her," Adrienne Daniels said. "It was (two people). It was just a bad situation."

How talking about it helps

Part of the solution to resolving eating issues involves therapy, Richardson said. People often think they need fewer calories than they do, and if their bodies aren't nourished enough, they experience more anxiety, fatigue and poor sleep, he said. Low bone density can be a long-term problem.

Sarah Daniels said that what helps right now is talking about how she copes with her food regulation and how she sees her body.

"I say, 'You're counting calories because you want to be the best you can be for yourself,' " she said.

The actor's community on Twitch, a platform where people play video games for a live audience, has been an open and safe place for her to open up. As [ImSarahDaniels](#), she regularly streams to more than 35,000 followers. Her mom helps moderate the comments. Her cat Bungie — so named after the developer of her beloved video game Destiny — watches. Her husband jokes that his voice ends up in the background like Mr. Wilson, the invisible neighbor in the 1990s sitcom "Home Improvement."

As Daniels knocks out her favorite games, she shares her life with her community, telling them how she sang "Hopelessly Devoted to You" a bunch of times during rehearsal. Or that she accidentally sliced her finger cutting half an ounce off her buffalo chicken fingers.

Her support system has remained strong, though her family members say they don't know what to say to restore her confidence in her body.

"I've tried to be supportive because I just see the mood that she gets in and the way that it affects her day-to-day life and how she feels about herself," Scott said. "I've never been like, 'You have to stop this,' because I know it's not going to work."

"I would love for her to be able to eat food without thinking about what it's going to do to her," her mother said. "Like, just get up in the morning and be able to eat a regular breakfast and not worry about the calories."

If you go

What: "Grease."

When: Feb. 7-March 31.

Where: Beef & Boards Dinner Theatre, 9301 Michigan Road.

Cost: \$45-\$70 for dinner and the show. \$6 off per ticket for ages 3-15. Kids under 3 not admitted.

Tickets: 317-872-9664.