

causeceleb

jamie-lynn sigler back from the brink

*The Sopranos star shares her story in the
hope of saving teens from eating disorders*

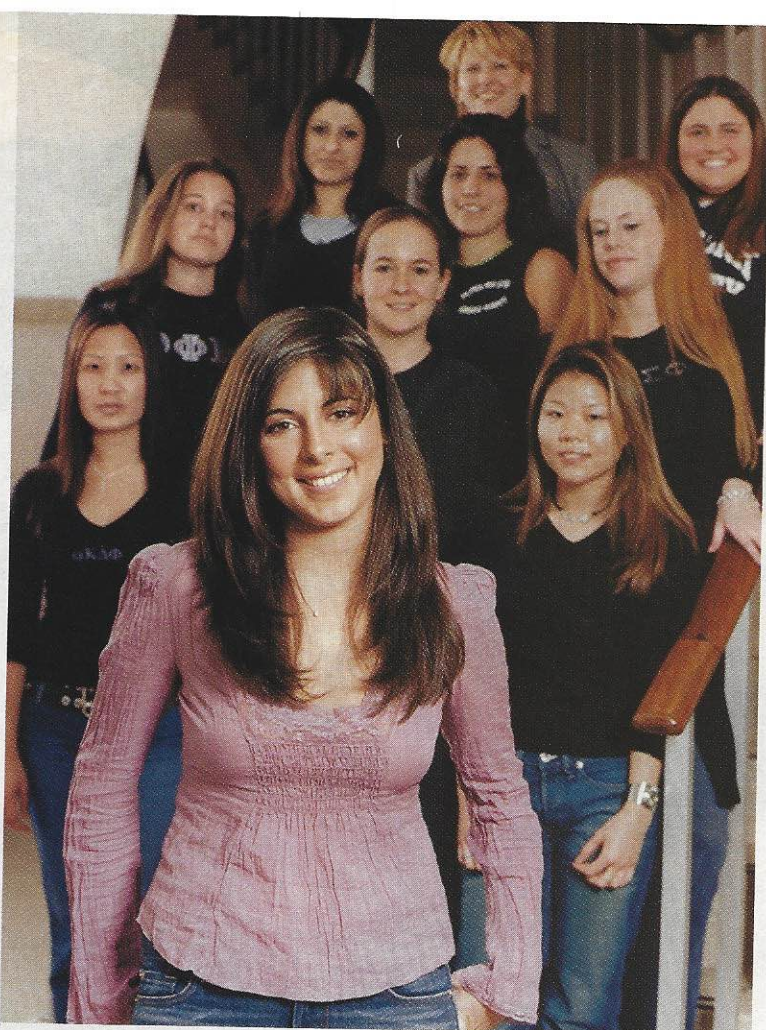
I was 17 when I got my big acting break: the role of Tony Soprano's daughter, Meadow, on *The Sopranos*. It should have been an amazing time, but I was miserable. I was suffering from an eating disorder and slowly starving and exercising myself to death.

An eating disorder is usually caused by a deep, underlying emotional problem; eating (or, rather, *not* eating) is just the way it expresses itself. In my case a boyfriend had dumped me and I was devastated. I thought the reason he broke up with me was that I wasn't pretty enough or thin enough. I'd tell myself, "If I could just lose five pounds, he'd see that he made a big mistake!" But five pounds turned into 15; 15 pounds into 30. I couldn't stop.

For six months I ate next to nothing. Breakfast would be three scrambled egg whites and two tomatoes. Lunch was a scooped-out bagel with mustard. For dinner, a fat-free yogurt. I also exercised compulsively (I'd get up at 4 A.M. each day before school and spend two hours on my treadmill) to burn each measly calorie I consumed—and then some. Pretty soon I couldn't stand to see myself in a mirror. I hated the way I looked. I hated my life. I wanted to die.

That desperate thought scared me so much I broke down and confided in my parents. They got me to a therapist. The first few sessions my mom did the talking. But gradually I learned to relax and be honest about my feelings. It felt great to open up, and eventually I decided to come out in the media. It was a way to confront my problem head-on—and help other teens in the process. I started working with the National Eating Disorders Association. As part of its Ambassador's Council, I visit schools to tell students my story. They hear it all: my exercise obsession (I'd carry my dirty clothes to the basement one piece at a time so I'd have to trudge up and down the

"Even though I only met these girls a few hours ago, a strong bond has been formed," says Sigler, with NYU students after a speaking engagement.



stairs) and how my mom wept when she hugged me because she could feel every bone in my body. Some kids cry when they hear me speak. At New York University one girl confessed she wakes up at 2 A.M. every day to work out. "I can't stop," she said. (It was the first time she had told anyone.) Sometimes they just need to hear my story so they can face up to the fact that they may have a problem.

I'm always surprised at how easily girls confide in me. I guess it's because I'm someone their age who has been there. They're like, "Hey, if she can open up, so can I." Look—I'm not a doctor; I don't know what they specifically need. All that I can do is describe what I've been through and how I survived. "If you need me, I'm here," I tell them. I mean it. They stay in touch through e-mail, letting me know how they're doing. This summer I'm hosting Web chats at nationaleatingdisorders.org, to reach as many young people as I can. I'm also helping plan the association's Teen Initiative, a campaign to educate teens about eating problems.

I've been healthy for three years now, but you never get over an eating disorder; it leaves a scar on your life forever. For me that's a good thing. I need to remember what it was like so I never go there again. More important, it helps me prevent other teens from being in that same awful place. —as told to Sheryl Berk

*For more information, visit the Web site at nationaleatingdisorders.org, or pick up Sigler's new book, *Wise Girl: What I Learned About Life, Love and Loss* (Pocket Books, 2002).*