

Faith, Biblical Principles Guide Best-Selling Fitness Entrepreneur

Gary Heavin, author of the best-selling book *Curves*, bases his business philosophy on Christian values

Although the Bible says the body is God's temple, keeping it trim and healthy confounds many people. Americans spend almost \$50 billion every year on fitness centers, diet plans and weight-loss treatments.

Unfortunately, the upward spiral toward obesity has continued despite the money and time invested in these endeavors. Enter Gary Heavin, a Waco, Texas-based entrepreneur who has developed a health and fitness program that offers women a fast-paced, low-cost and effective game plan to fight the battle of the bulge. What's more, the founder of Curves International bases his business philosophy on biblical principles and recognizes God's hand in his success.

"Christian radio, Christian television and most importantly reading the Bible turned my life around," said Heavin (pronounced Haven), who attends Highland Baptist Church in Waco. Christian Broadcasting Network founder Pat Robertson's book *Secret Kingdom* "helped from a business perspective because I realized there are biblical values such as integrity and the laws of use, service, unity and miracles that are applicable to running a corporation."

More than 5,000 Curves fitness centers currently operate in all 50 states and seven foreign countries, serving 2 million women. Nearly 200 new franchises, which average about 1,200

square feet, open each month. Entrepreneur magazine ranks the company as the fastest-growing franchise operation in the world.

The no-frills, compact establishments target women over 30 with their low-cost, 30-minute workouts. Utilizing eight to 12 hydraulic-resistance weight machines that Heavin designed and specially sized for women's smaller frames, exercisers spend only 30 seconds on each station and keep their heart rates up by walking or jogging in place before moving to the next one. The strength-training equipment incorporates squats as well as leg, shoulder and abdominal presses, and addresses all the major muscle groups without the hassle of stacked weights.

"I've enjoyed great success with my franchise," said Trish Tavernier-Finken, who opened her Curves center in Toledo, Ohio, in April. "I already have 40 to 50 regular customers, and several of them have lost over 20 pounds."

Success did not arrive easily for Heavin, however. The 48-year-old businessman suffered a traumatic childhood, enduring the double blows of his parents' divorce and subsequent death of his mother when he was 13. But her tragic demise from a stroke served as the catalyst that brought the health and nutritional counselor to the Christian faith.

"At that moment, I was at the bottom of everything and couldn't survive without clinging to Christ," Heavin said. "I reached out and was saved actually kneeling at her deathbed."

Struggles continued as a teen, however, and Heavin bounced around several colleges before taking over a failing health club in Houston. Although tight finances forced him to sleep

in the center's nursery, he made the operation profitable within a year.

By age 26, the entrepreneur had expanded to six locations and produced a million-dollar income statement. Four years later, Heavin owned 14 fitness centers, had written his first book and developed a revolutionary method to raise metabolism.

But overexpansion forced the operation into bankruptcy, leaving Heavin jobless and \$5 million in debt. Divorce and the loss of his two children compounded the problem and forced the former business superstar to turn toward God for guidance.

"I was wandering in the desert as a Christian," Heavin said. "But in order to be teachable, you have to suffer sufficiently. I suffered through the loss of my wife and children, the business, and my reputation.

"At age 30, I found myself on my knees telling God: 'OK, I did it my way all these years and look at the mess I've made. Now, You're going to get the rest of my life.'"

After reconciling with God, Heavin remarried and regained custody of the two children from his previous marriage. Putting his faith in action, the fitness leader opened the first Curves franchise in 1995. From that humble beginning, the last eight years have seen unprecedented growth.

Heavin's book *Curves: Permanent Results Without Permanent Dieting* recently debuted on the New York Times best-seller list. Despite his company's rapid expansion, he remains centered in his Christian faith and credits God with keeping his life in perspective.

"I stayed focused on biblical laws that made me much smarter than I am," Heavin said. "God has a better plan for your life than you or I do. We are made for His pleasure and purpose, and the only true joy is to find it."

John Hillman