



(Also pictured with Jessica and Mayor Sullivan is Steve Thompson, Jessica's CREATE Award recipient.)

## **Jessica Williams**

Jessica Williams has experienced something most people won't, either as a young person or an adult – saving her own life. Her journey from victim of a rare disease to a champion and advocate for her own health is an inspiring one, especially given her youth and total inexperience in navigating the health care industry.

As a freshman, Jessica struggled with weight. As a sophomore, she began having trouble with her legs. They would swell to double in size, to the point where she couldn't even put on her shoes without extreme pain. It became too painful to walk, and she began missing school. After visiting her first doctor to consult about the problem, she was told that she was “just fat” and to “not eat so much.” But Jessica knew something else was wrong.

After missing so much school because of her disability, Jessica was withdrawn from her classes. She continued to struggle with her painfully swollen legs, and her weight continued to skyrocket despite eating a normal diet. Ultimately, she reached over 500 pounds.

Jessica began researching her condition, and came to the conclusion that she needed weight loss surgery to save her life. She poured through medical journals and read scores of articles online. She continued her quest by visiting with several doctors, all of whom told her she was not a candidate for surgery. Still, Jessica persisted, driven by her inner voice that told her something was wrong with her. She just knew it, and so she pressed on.

During this time, Jessica self-diagnosed herself with a condition called Lymphedema, which causes extremely painful swelling due to a blockage of the lymph passages .A doctor confirmed her suspicions, and Jessica was validated in knowing that her pain was real and not imagined. Buoyed by her success, she persisted in her quest for weight loss surgery.

After years of anxiety and stress about her health, Jessica finally found a surgeon who would operate on her. The challenge was that he practiced in Brazil and the price tag was steep. Still, she hoped for a miracle. One finally came months later when an unexpected legal settlement came to the family. It was just enough to pay for the surgery, and Jessica was on her way. In July of 2009, weighing in at 535 pounds, Jessica had her surgery in Brazil. Before the procedure, medical staff prepared her for serious potential complications: a collapsed lung, serious infection, even death were all possible. Three weeks later, she was healthy enough to travel home.

After healing and learning how to live a healthy lifestyle, Jessica enrolled in Nine Star because it offered options for students with special circumstances. She is taking classes now and is laser-focused on getting her diploma and eventually attending college. She is a living example of what young people with a goal can achieve, and is a true inspiration to those who know what it best for them, and never give up.