

## Hard life to hard body: Robyn Gill's journey competitive bodybuilding

**LARISSA CAHUTE**  
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Standing before a provincial court judge in Surrey, Robyn Gill listened to the list of assault charges filed against

her after yet another bar fight and vowed to turn her life around.

It was 2008 and her sixth time in court on charges stemming from six years spent running around with Surrey drug dealers and gangsters.

"I (was) hanging out with the worst people in Surrey that you could imagine ... a bunch of gangsters, and got really mixed up in that life of partying," Gill said. "I was hanging out with bad guys and getting arrested, ending up in jail just for fighting at bars, getting hospitalized."

She was also anorexic and "addicted" to the weight-loss supplement Hydroxycut. She weighed in at 90 pounds.

It was all "to be a part of the image of the drug dealer's girlfriend," she said. "It's a horrible lifestyle and you're stuck in it."

Watching her dad in court, "looking like he was going to cry," Gill, then 23, decided she'd had enough.

"I couldn't handle being there anymore," she said. "I refused to be a part of that life and a part of that person that was going downhill."

Gill received a one-year conditional sentence.

Seven years later, you'd never guess that Gill, now a fit and sociable certified personal trainer and competitive bodybuilder, came from such a rough background.

## **BODYBUILDING GOAL**

In addition to launching a clothing line, Ripped Muscle Apparel, she's currently preparing to compete at the Canadian Bodybuilding Federation National Championships in July. Her ultimate goal is to represent Canada in the Ms. Figure Olympia category at the world's biggest bodybuilding competition.

"When I look back, I wish I could have shaken that girl so hard," said Gill of her troubled past.

Her spiral into Surrey's gang culture began in the early 2000s, when she was 17 years old and her mother, who was bipolar, committed suicide in the family home.

"Obviously, I wasn't ready for that. It wasn't what I expected for my graduating year (of high school)," she said. "I went a little crazy.

"I was angry with life. I was mad at everything," she said. "My actions definitely took a toll on the whole family, my dad the hardest. They were always the ones having to come and pry me out."

Gill followed through on her 2008 pledge to leave her high-risk lifestyle. She believes she was able to make a "clean break" because she's a woman, whereas her boyfriend at the time never could. He was later killed in a gangland shooting.

As she transitioned into her new life, which included a job in insurance, her weight jumped from 90 pounds to 157 pounds.

"Food was a comfort," she said. "The next thing I knew I was eating, like, a Burger King breakfast, McDonald's at lunch."

Embarrassed when an old friend pointed out her weight gain, Gill stopped eating out and started to hit the gym. By focusing on cardio training, she dropped 20 pounds.

She initially refused to step in the weight room, afraid of getting "too bulky." But when a friend convinced her to

start lifting, she quickly embraced it.

“You’re in control. You have that feeling of strength. You’re pushing yourself past your limits,” she said. “I got really addicted to that high that I was getting in the gym.”

She stopped focusing on cardio, learned more about nutrition and began eating to build muscle.

She became a certified personal trainer. But just as she started to gain control of her life, she suffered a series of devastating losses.

In 2012, her father hit his head and later died while she was visiting him in hospital. “He just stopped breathing,” Gill said, holding back tears. “I thought watching my mom go was bad, but seeing my dad stop breathing was worse.”

Three months later her grandmother died.

### **'ANYONE I'VE GROWN UP WITH IS DEAD'**

In January 2013, Manny Hairan, her ex-boyfriend from high school — a childhood friend — was found dead in a laneway in Whalley. Hairan was an associate of slain gangster Sukh Dhak.

By April 2013, her grandfather had died.

“Anyone I’ve grown up with is dead,” said Gill. “(Death was) happening all around me.”

That month, depressed and alone, she planned to kill herself.

But as she contemplated her own death in her basement suite in Surrey, her mind began to race.

“You start to think about your whole life and all that’s happened to you,” said Gill. “And something clicked in that minute.”

One question entered her mind: “If I could do anything now, what is it that I would do?”

Gill realized that she did have a goal worth living for: She wanted to make it to the worldwide bodybuilding stage.

“Since that moment, I’ve been driven. I don’t waste time,” she said. “I started fresh that day.”

By November 2013, just eight months later, she entered her first novice bodybuilding competition. She placed second, then moved on to the B.C. Provincial Bodybuilding Championships, where she placed fourth and qualified for this summer’s national competition.

### **QUICK RISE TO COMPETITIONS**

Most people have to compete at the novice level a number of times before moving on to provincials, said Gill.

Gill’s trainer and coach, Billy Danh, said her quick rise at bodybuilding competitions is “really rare.”

“Within a year she’s already in the national level and this year she’s going to be competing with pretty much the best of Canada — all in a very short time span, which is pretty unreal,” he said, adding it usually takes his clients two years of training before they even make it to a stage.

“It’s pretty crazy to see her from day one to now.”

When Danh and Gill had their first meeting at a Starbucks in 2013, she wasn’t very muscular, he said. She told him about her “hugely ambitious” goal to make it to Ms. Olympia and handed him a three-page plan in which she had

listed all the bodybuilding shows and competitions over the next couple of years.

“This coming from a girl that never even stepped on stage before,” said Danh. “At first, to be honest, I was kind of like, ‘Well this girl’s crazy.’ But weeks and months passed and she was looking better and better. I look at her now and it’s very inspiring to see how far she’s come. Of all the people I’ve trained, she’s probably the most passionate person.”

## **AIMING FOR THE WORLD STAGE**

After two years of training her, Danh believes she will make it to the world stage.

“(You need) that hunger,” he said. “And that’s what she has the most, above anything.”

Gill trains most days of the week, eats only non-processed, whole foods to help build her body, and doesn’t indulge in a single cheat meal during the 12 weeks before a competition.

“I’m super crazy focused. I care too much about this,” said Gill.

She still fields “negativity about looking like a man” and accusations from strangers that she is using steroids, she said.

“With social media, there’s constant comments,” said Gill. “(But) when people actually see me in person, they see my size and frame — that I’m not a monster — and I’ve never had a comment like that to my face.”

Bodybuilding competitions don’t test for steroids, said Gill. She doesn’t take any steroids now, she said, but admits to “minimal dosing” after she got breast implants in January 2014. “It was to help recover my strength and overall recovery,” she said.

Gill says her achievements have come down to one question: “What do you expect from yourself?”

“When you grow up, you have all these people that have expectations,” she said. “For me, all those people had died.”

So it was up to her to ask that question of herself. Her answer?

“I always want to be better than I was yesterday. It’s a very hard goal (to get to Ms. Olympia), but I believe you can do anything you put your heart into, and I push my heart out.

“Fitness is everything. My heart is in this industry because it saved me. It really did.”

## **ROBYN GILL ON THREE COMMON HEALTH AND FITNESS MYTHS:**

### **‘Lifting heavy will make you look like a man’**

Robyn Gill’s female clients often tell her they worry that lifting heavy weights will build a bulky, masculine figure.

“To gain muscle, to get leaner, you do need to have progression. Lifting heavy weights is not going to make you turn into a man,” said Gill. “Women do not have testosterone in their bodies. Girls that look like men are lifting heavy and on steroids.”

### **‘Eating more than three meals a day will make you fat’**

According to Gill, you need to eat something every three hours to speed up your metabolism. That means six or seven small meals a day. Most important: Never skip breakfast!

### **‘Exercise is all you need for weight loss’**

When it comes to losing weight, it's 70 per cent nutrition and 30 per cent physical activity, said Gill.

However, giving into temptation once in a while is “not the end of the world,” said Gill, who indulges in a cheat meal here and there except in the weeks leading up to a competition.

“I’m human and I have weak moments, so I totally YOLO it out,” she said.

[lcahute@theprovince.com](mailto:lcahute@theprovince.com)

[twitter.com/larissacahute](https://twitter.com/larissacahute)

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