

## Climbing Up from Rock Bottom

*I was 240 pounds, prediabetic, and on medication for high cholesterol, high triglycerides and diabetes.*

*by Shayda Soleymani*

**I**n 1997 I went to see a prominent doctor who specialized in weight management. He told me something I never forgot: “It would take a herculean effort for you to ever lose weight and to maintain



*Shayda at 240 pounds*

that weight-loss.” His comments affected me mentally, physically and emotionally from that point on.

Since my late twenties I have tried every diet imaginable. I always lost weight but quickly gained it back—and then some. In my late forties I reached my highest weight: nearly 240 pounds. My cholesterol was over 400 mg/dL (below 200 is desirable) and my triglycerides well over 700 (normal is considered below 150

mg/dL). I was also prediabetic and on medication for high cholesterol, high triglycerides, and diabetes. Not surprisingly, I didn’t feel very good about myself.

When I turned 50 I had back surgery, and my doctor said I needed to lose weight if I wanted my back to heal. I thought I was eating healthy, since I was vegan; but looking back I was more of a “junk food” vegan: french fries, potato chips and diet Coke. I was also overeating on nuts and dried fruits. I was sick and tired

*“When I met Chef AJ, I just knew in my heart that I had found the person who was going to change my life.”*

of being sick and tired. It was June 2011 and I had hit rock bottom. I didn’t want to continue living like this. Something had to change.

They say that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear; and that was so true for me. While visiting my mom one day, I noticed that she was watching a PBS special about Dr. Joel Fuhrman. What he was saying about nutrition made sense to me. I looked him up online and discovered he was offering a week-long retreat in Utah. I asked my mom to go with me, and off we went!

### **One Step at a Time**

We met some wonderful people and really enjoyed the retreat. Even



*Shayda today, at 128 pounds*

though we had spent a week there learning about plant-based eating, I still didn’t really know how to apply everything once I returned home. But I knew I had stumbled upon something great.

As we were heading back to the airport, my mom asked a woman sitting next to her if she knew of any other events like this near Los Angeles, where I lived. She told us about the Healthy Lifestyle Expo in Woodland Hills. We signed up immediately!

It was at the Healthy Life Expo that I first heard about Chef AJ. After this I attended a class she was teaching near my home. When I met Chef AJ, I just knew in my heart that I had found the person who was going to change my life. I loved her energy, and her food tasted so good!

Our next event was Healthy Taste



Shayda with Chef AJ

of L.A. It was here that I met John Pierre, a nutrition and fitness trainer. He was absolutely amazing! Around this time I had torn the tendon in my ankle, and after visiting five doctors, they were all in agreement that I needed surgery. Wanting to avoid surgery, I met with John Pierre, in hopes that he could help me.

The doctor had me wearing a boot on my foot, and I was not allowed to put any pressure on it. I had no idea how I was going to exercise. Twice a week John Pierre came to my apartment. I never knew that you could still get a great workout sitting in a chair! There were no more excuses.

We not only worked out, but JP also worked on my head. He never talked to me about how much weight to lose, only about getting healthy. We talked about nutrition as well as compassion, especially for myself. He moved my scale behind my couch where I could not get to it. I had been addicted to my scale and, like most people, I would easily let the scale determine my mood. He used to say: "Only fish need scales!" In addition, he said that if I continued with this lifestyle, I would not need ankle surgery.

## The 30-day Challenge

On January 12, 2012 my life

changed forever. This is when AJ began her event called the 30-day Unprocessed Challenge. After the first meeting, she passed out a healthy dessert. As the tray came around I looked up to John Pierre. I focused on his eyes and didn't touch the dessert; I just passed it along. That laser beam focus is what set the tone for me getting healthy. Saying "no thank you" to desserts, even the healthy ones, was one of the best things I ever did along my journey.

My friends and I had decided that at the end of the 30 days we would go out and celebrate. Well, I'm happy to report that we never went out. By the



Shayda with John Pierre

end of the challenge I had lost 18 pounds, and I was on cloud nine. I told my friends that I would no longer be going out, and that I planned to keep eating this way. And I loved what I was eating!

For so many years I had been told that I could not eat bananas, rice, potatoes, beans, mangoes, and so many other plant foods. And now I was being told to go ahead and "carb up!" I could eat these foods until I was satisfied. I also learned that I could not out-exercise a bad diet. As Dr. Michael Klaper always says, "It's the food, it's always the food!"

My weight was finally creeping

down. I had never felt better and I was very determined. I wanted to be healthy more than anything else. Nothing and no one was going to get in my way. I did everything that Chef AJ and John Pierre told me to do. I worked the program the way they said to. For one year I was totally immersed in the program. I took every class that was offered, and I went to every lecture and conference. You name it, I did it!

I also attended the McDougall 10-day Program (in Santa Rosa, California) toward the end of 2012. Once there, and under Dr. McDougall's medical supervision, I stopped taking all my medications. (I had been taking Vytorin for my cholesterol, metformin for diabetes, and niacin for my triglycerides.) He even taught me how to talk with my own doctor. After the Program I went with Chef AJ to TrueNorth Health Center (also in Santa Rosa), and have been returning there every year since. There is always more to learn.

## Back to See the Doctor

Four months after leaving the McDougall Program, my mom and I went to visit our doctor (we have the same doctor, and my mom had also gone off of her meds). When the doctor came into the room, he was very happy to see us. He was very pleased by my numbers, and commented that my higher-dose medications were helping. He was also pleased that my weight had come down. I wound up my curveball...

"Doctor, I have something to tell you. I stopped taking my meds four months ago." He was shocked. I explained to him that the meds weren't helping me get to the root causes of my problems, and that they only made my numbers look better. And if I ate an unprocessed, whole-food, plant-based diet that was free of added salt, oil, and sugar ("SOS-free"), no meds would be needed.

He was intrigued and asked



what I was eating. My mom blurted out, "Potatoes!" I thought his neck was going to snap. He said, "You can't have potatoes." I asked him why not. He said because I was pre-diabetic. Then I asked him how my numbers looked for my A1C, CRP, glucose, cholesterol, and triglycerides. He replied that they were all down. My glucose was perfect; he could not believe it. He sat back in his chair and asked to hear more.

I explained everything to him about my new diet, and that it wasn't the potato that was the problem but what people were putting on it: butter, sour cream, bacon, etc. Potatoes were fine if all I was putting on them was salsa, veggies, and beans.

I ended up bringing him all the best books, by Colin Campbell, Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, Dr. Joel Fuhrman, Dr. John McDougall, Dr. Alan Goldhamer, Chef AJ and John Pierre. Today, my doctor is completely on board. In fact, he's teaching this lifestyle to his patients (those who are willing to listen). He and his family now eat a whole-food, plant-based diet. I truly believe we must educate our own doctors, and we must take control of our own health.

### Six Years Later

It's now been six years since I started my journey to become healthy, and I have never looked back! I still have that same laser-beam focus and determination. I still take classes, I still immerse myself in this program, and I hang around like-minded people. Continuing education is the key for me. I'm constantly fine-tuning myself. I always want to take things to the next level. This year I have two goals: one is doing meditation daily and the other is to run a 5K. I have started my daily meditation, and I have started training for my first 5K. Freedom has never tasted so good!

By the way, I never had the surgery on my ankle; everything healed. I am completely off all my meds, and


have lost 112 pounds altogether. I went from a size 1X to a size 4! I have never felt better and happier in my life!


I owe a debt of gratitude to Chef AJ and John Pierre. I couldn't have done it without them. I'm happy that for the first time in my life I have lost the weight and not gained it back, and it's still coming down. I have my health and life back! I truly believe that we can have the health and body that we all deserve!

I recently learned about the NHA while I was at TrueNorth and also met Mark and Wanda Huberman there. I am now a member of the NHA and



Shayda and her mom are amazed at how delicious healthy meals can be.

subscriber to *Health Science*! A whole-food, plant-based diet changed my life—how could I not support this great cause? The truth needs to be told! 



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