

Going It Together

NHA couple lost half their combined weight on a plant-based diet.

by Jason and Sarah Ramos

Jason's Story

My story began in late 2012 when I learned that my 54-year-old mom had developed pre-diabetes. The news hit hard. I love my mom and want her in my life for as long as



Jason Ramos at 342 pounds in 2013.

possible, and I knew that this condition could take her away prematurely. Shortly thereafter, my dad had a heart attack. His cardiologist placed a stent to open the blockage and said he'd be fine. The doctor also told him that his cholesterol levels weren't bad. In fact, he never

had a patient as fit as my dad. I couldn't wrap my head around this contradiction: If my dad maintained good health, how did he have a heart attack? I mulled it over for quite some time.

Misfortune struck me more personally in February 2013. I work as a truck driver and was 500 miles from home. Working outside in the rain, I slipped off the back of my trailer and fell nearly five feet. I suffered two compression fractures in my lower back, and excruciating pain kept me from working over the next four months. I feared that I'd never regain my mobility. Fortunately, I didn't require surgery and remain active to this day. I now see the injury as a blessing in disguise. In fact, I consider it the best thing that has ever happened to me. My injury brought introspection, and I thought, "I'm much larger and eat far worse than either of my parents. They're clearly not bulletproof and neither am I."

My doctor reinforced this message. He told me that my excess weight contributed to my fractures, and recommended that I start to eat more fruits and vegetables. My diet consisted mostly of sheet cakes, ice cream, pizza, chicken wings, and hamburgers; so he did make a fair point.

His staff was on board and drank fruit and vegetable smoothies at their desks, but I had no intention of doing the same. As someone who travelled long distances to restaurants where celebrities accepted eating challenges—typically out-eating the TV-personalities with pride—smoothies just didn't appeal to me. Incidentally, a simple blood test my doctor ordered was far more impactful.

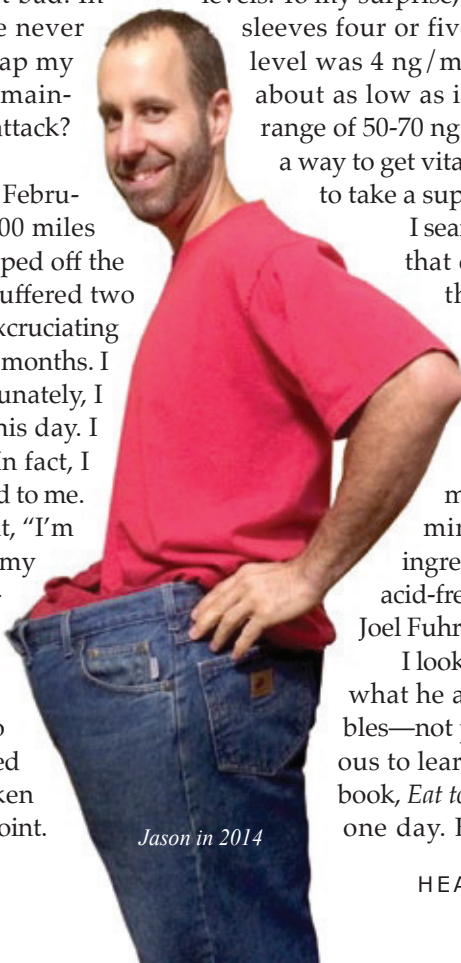
As doctors routinely do, mine checked my vitamin D levels. To my surprise, although I worked outside in short sleeves four or five hours each week, my vitamin D level was 4 ng/mL, which is not only deficient but about as low as it can be (healthy levels are in the range of 50-70 ng/mL). I had no intention of finding a way to get vitamin D through my diet so I decided to take a supplement.

I searched the Internet for a multivitamin that could deliver vitamin D and all of the other vitamins and minerals I needed to be healthy. I came across a Cornell University study that implicated folic acid, an ingredient in virtually all multivitamins, in cancer development. It blew my mind to think that most multivitamins could contain this destructive ingredient. This led me to hunt for a folic acid-free multivitamin. I discovered that Dr. Joel Fuhrman had developed such a product.

I looked into Dr. Fuhrman's work to learn what he advocates: more fruits and vegetables—not particularly exciting. But I felt curious to learn more and so I bought his audiobook, *Eat to Live*. I listened to the entire book in one day. Everything he espoused was evi-



Sarah and Jason in front of his truck, 2014.



Jason in 2014

dence-based, backed by study after study. It just made sense. It left no doubt in my mind that a plant-based diet was the healthiest way to eat. However, I still didn't feel ready to give up meat and sugar.

The following day, I recall eating a very unhealthy lunch with my mom and sister. I told them about the book and laughed about the low quality of the meal we had sat down to. I shared my conviction that if everyone in our country adopted this eating style, we could shut down most hospitals. But I also told them that there was no way I could eat that way; it was far too strict.

The following morning, I felt different. My mindset had changed. I weighed more than ever before—a whopping 342 pounds—and for the first time in my life, I knew what I needed to do to become healthy. I didn't eat my usual junk food that day. Instead, I bought a Nutribullet blender, and made a smoothie out of broccoli, plums, carrot, flaxseed, and kale. It tasted disgusting but I choked it down. I did this day after day, making small modifications to make it increasingly palatable. I also began to eat large salads and make my own dressings from nuts instead of oil. I took advantage of the recovery time allotted for my broken back and used it to heal my entire body.

Since that day, I have made leaps and bounds. My discipline increased and the weight came off. As happens to all of us, I had my share of setbacks and unhealthy meals. But invariably, I got right back on the horse. I listened to (or read every book and podcast) that Dr. Fuhrman published, and when my willpower waned, I would listen to *Eat to Live*. I think I've heard it at least six times now.

I lost nearly half of my body weight, dropping to 180 pounds within just one year of following this plant-based eating plan. I got a new job, still truck driving but now I work for myself. Driving for long hours, I found myself snacking on Larabars far too often. Having no idea how to eat in moderation, I would often eat 10 to 15 of these calorie-packed dried fruit and nut bars at a time. While I still ate healthy foods, I came to eat 35 Larabars in a week, not to mention frequent handfuls of nuts that I'd eat mindlessly as I drove. My weight was returning and I needed to renew my commitment.

I weighed 214 pounds when my wife Sarah and I arrived at TrueNorth Health Center in Santa Rosa, California, the location of my reboot. I completed a 28-day water-only fast, leaving there with my weight at my record low: 178 pounds. Physically, I felt great, but the most value I received came in the form of knowledge. Drs. Goldhamer, Klaper, and the



Jason and Sarah cross the finish line.

multitude of other highly intelligent staff furnished Sarah and me with invaluable information and offered us the tools we needed to take our health to the next level.

I now follow Dr. Fuhrman's Nutritarian diet with the addition of white potatoes, which I'm thrilled to eat again. I've increased my protein intake, not through powders but with beans and lentils. I discovered that Larabars are a trigger food for me, far too calorie-dense to eat just one. Accordingly, I've eliminated them from my diet and can now keep my fat intake in check.

Then there's alcohol. When I arrived at TrueNorth, I noticed all the local craft beers. I couldn't wait to try them once I had completed my fast! But once the fast concluded, the desire had completely vanished. While I won't eliminate alcohol entirely, I no longer have a drink with dinner. Instead, I limit alcohol to a few times per year in a social context.

I'm also excited to begin an exercise program that David Goldman, a strength coach and registered dietitian, set up for me. I learned a lot about exercise from simply attending his lectures, as he abides by a different approach than I've followed. He advocates exercises that use multiple joints and selects movements that require your belly button to move in space. I was able to meet with him for a training consult where he designed an exercise regimen based on my particular goals and occupational challenges. My exercise program requires nothing but my own bodyweight, and it is something I can do right in the parking lot at a truck stop.

To sum it all up, I feel like I've flipped 180 degrees. Dr. Fuhrman's approach gave me what I needed to get the ball rolling, and TrueNorth has helped me tweak and solidify these changes. My confidence has skyrocketed and I feel less back pain now than at any point since my injury. Visiting TrueNorth was one of the best decisions I've ever made and I'd love to return again someday. My experience was so positive that I've been referring TrueNorth to all of my friends and family. If you're considering taking the trip yourself, I highly recommend it.



Sarah and Jason, 2017

Sarah's Story



Sarah at 300 pounds, in 2006.

I've been overweight for as long as I can remember. Wanting desperately to become one of the "skinny girls," I tried every diet imaginable, but never to any avail. I played basketball, soccer, and was a track and field athlete throughout middle and high school, but this

didn't help me. I remember feeling immensely jealous of my friends because they could eat whatever they wanted without gaining a pound. Just the smell of food, however, would make me gain weight.

When I thought I had maxed out my body's ability to store fat, I learned I was mistaken. In January 2006, I attended college halfway across the country and came to feel homesick and depressed. Ten months of taking comfort in daily, fast food meals packed 100 pounds onto my frame. When I moved back home in October of that year, I had reached an astounding 300 pounds. I felt disgusted with myself. I attempted portion control and a variety of fad diets. I was treading water and began to take anti-depressants.

I also found that regardless of how many hours I slept, I always felt tired. I remember falling asleep on the road a number of times, waking up just before crashing into another car or driving off the road. I'm entirely grateful that I didn't hurt myself or anyone else. My family physician tested me for sleep apnea, absent seizures, and narcolepsy but found no answers. He prescribed Ritalin and vitamin B12 but neither helped me stay awake. Talking on the phone and incessant snacking were all I could do to keep from dozing off, neither being a particularly productive remedy.

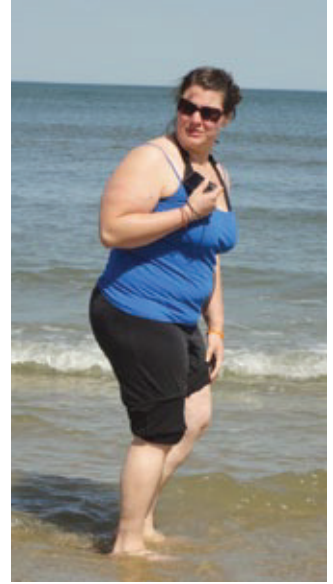


Jason and Sarah in 2014.

One morning in July 2011, I awoke to find that the entire left side of my body had gone numb. Hardheaded as I am, I convinced myself that it resulted from sleeping poorly and went to work. I remember constantly tripping over my left foot and reminding myself to lift that leg with each step. My boss quickly came to see my disability and sent me right to the emergency room. A CT scan and an MRI informed me that this was likely either an inoperable brain tumor or the start of multiple sclerosis (MS). I was prescribed Provigil to stay awake on the road and Trazadone to help me sleep at night, and sent back home. I spent the next 10 weeks scared to no end, fearing that a brain tumor would soon end my life.

I received a second opinion in October of 2011 when a diagnosis of MS was confirmed. I felt conflicted; I was relieved that a brain tumor wouldn't kill me but fearful that I would spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair, relying on others to care for me. My doctor started me on the MS injection Copaxone, but it didn't seem to help. The six-month follow-up MRI showed more lesions and I experienced chronic pain and migraines. My doctor switched my MS medication to beta interferon but additional MRIs revealed lesion progression.

May 2014 marked the beginning of my upward swing. I met a strange gentleman who informed me—within the first hour of our first date—that he follows a strange eating plan. He very rarely ate meat and adhered almost exclusively to a plant-based diet. While I only rarely told people of my MS, I decided to share this with him from the start, figuring that if it scared him off I might as well take care of that early. But to my surprise, my MS had the opposite effect. He researched



Sarah in 2012

how diet and MS interplay and shared that a plant-based diet has been shown to work wonders for MS patients. My knee-jerk reaction was to reject such a diet since I loved meat, cheese, and ice cream far too much. Thankfully, he didn't put any pressure on me to make any big changes, and my eating habits slowly started to change. I would eat well when we were together, but after leaving his house, I would secretly eat fast food on my way home.

Curious to learn more about why this guy ate the way he did, I would ask him plenty of questions. He referred me to an audiobook he held in the highest regard, called *Eat to Live*, and told me that it would explain the underpinnings of his food choices. While not particularly excited to listen to a dry audiobook, I listened to it during a long drive to Maine for a family vacation. But that was all I needed.

In August of 2014 I jumped in with both feet. Within six weeks of eating a plant-based diet, I lost 22 pounds! I felt proud and excited; so excited that I deserved a treat. So after work I dropped by Arby's, my favorite fast food chain, and ordered my old favorites: a roast beef and cheddar sandwich, curly fries, and a large Mountain Dew. One bite of the sandwich and one sip of the soda was all it took. It tasted AWFUL, and into the trash it went. That wretched Arby's meal crystalized just how much tastier, healthier, and more satisfying a plant-based meal felt. I've since followed the plan without wavering.

My MS seemed to respond well to the plant-based diet, too! I was able to discontinue all prescription medications other than beta interferon, but I eventually weaned myself off of that as well. My last dose was injected in September of 2015. I am proud to say that I no longer take prescription medications of any kind. I feared, however, that all of the medications I had taken had left my body in a toxic state, and I wanted to rid myself of their residues. I hoped a water fast might help.

On January 2, 2017 I arrived at TrueNorth Health Center weighing 176 pounds and intending to complete a two- or three-week therapeutic



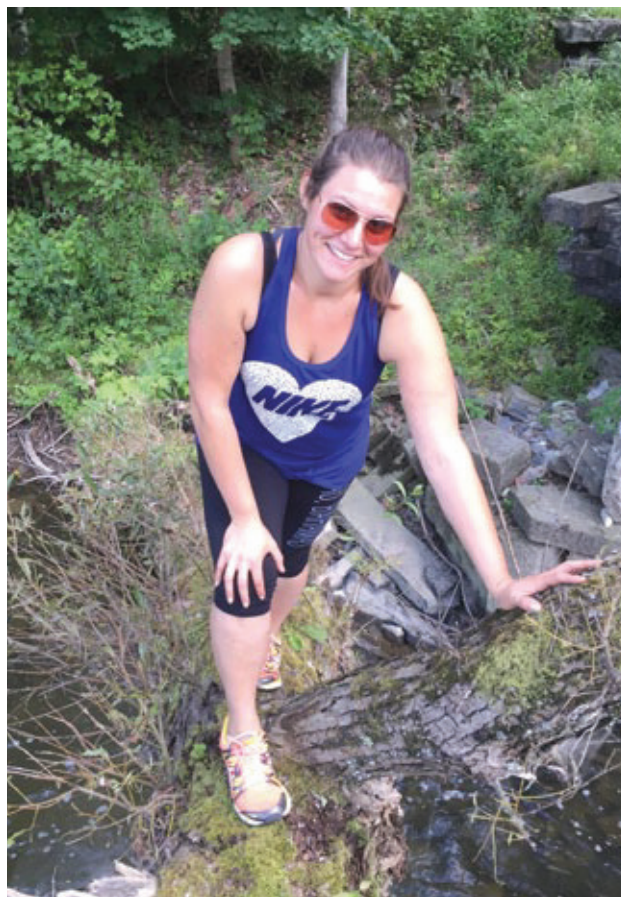
Jason and Sarah on their wedding day in 2016

water-only fast. I wanted to cleanse my body of the medications I had taken and with the hopes of stalling my MS progression. Two weeks into my fast, surprised at how good I felt, I decided to extend my fast even longer. I completed 38 days in total and feel FANTASTIC! My time at

TrueNorth has changed my outlook entirely and has given me amazing strength. I have tremendous conviction and will remain 100% plant-based. And while I never imagined I'd say this, I will no longer consume any alcohol.

This has been a great year so far and I feel confident that each day will only get better. I never thought I could achieve something so monumental, but I have now more than halved my body weight, from my heaviest at 300 pounds down to just 144 pounds. I feel better than ever and I cannot convey how proud I feel!

And that strange plant-eating guy I met? We got married. If it wasn't for our fortuitous date back in 2014, who knows what condition I'd be in today. I owe my health to my husband Jason, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank him for saving my life!



Sarah believes Jason saved her life and feels fantastic...at half her weight.

