

I was born small. 5 pounds 7 ounces to be exact, full term, in the hottest summer on record here in Chicago, 1980. I was small through high school, easily partaking in whatever fun foods my friends put in front of me, convinced that I would be small forever. Suddenly, hormones kicked in and I couldn't eat whatever I wanted anymore. My weight steadily climbed through high school, then I gained the "freshman 40" in college, the "first job 25" when I started working, and after that? It just kept going. I successfully lost 50 pounds in 2006, but never truly learned what I needed to do to keep it off. When my grandmother, and later my father, fell ill from cancer, I turned to my old friend: food. I steadily gained weight for years.

In 2009, I began writing a food and cooking blog, which featured creative and interesting recipes and photos of them for over 1200 readers a day. My readers looked to me to post the most decadent dishes (5-cheese macaroni and cheese with bacon) and elegant and sinful desserts (peanut-butter-stuffed triple chocolate cupcakes) and did I ever deliver. And indulge. And indulge. And indulge. Servings were out of control. Cookies were gobbled in a matter of a day. Casseroles designed for eight people lasted two dinners, maximum. I became completely ensconced by the community of food bloggers, living, breathing, and socializing all things food. As of August 2013, my blog traffic was higher than ever. Through ads and other revenue, I was earning hundreds of dollars a month to write about and photograph my food. People had started to count on me to bring the most delicious things at every gathering for work, and family functions weren't complete without a batch of my buttery rolls or rich and cheesy broccoli casserole. My recipes got more and more ridiculous, and my waistline got bigger and bigger.

I gained weight before my wedding, causing my dress to need extra alterations before the big day. I gained weight over my honeymoon. I gained, and gained, and gained... before I knew it, I couldn't shop at "regular" stores anymore, but I didn't look to myself. I instead blamed it on the sizing at the stores, the fact that I was top-heavy, and that maybe "regular" clothes just weren't meant to fit me.

I had absolutely no idea how big I'd become. As far as I was concerned, I was "healthy," albeit overweight, and was looking forward to starting a family with my husband at some point soon. After a discussion with my sister about our plans to start trying, I received an email from her, desperately pleading with me to get healthier before I got pregnant.

"I have done some research on high risk pregnancies, and it terrifies me. If you get pregnant, it is no longer about you anymore. Getting pregnant right now can be dangerous to you as well as your baby. I know you said you have talked to your doctor about this, but I really hope that you did some of your own research as well....You have the ability to get yourself healthy and I hope you know you have my support with that. I really hope that you take a year and get yourself to a point both physically and emotionally that is good for you and good for your family."

I remember thinking she was crazy. I wasn't "that" big. I wasn't "that" unhealthy. But things weren't easy. It was nearly impossible to climb stairs without either losing my breath or stopping to rest. I'm a middle school teacher, and I found myself teaching the majority of the time while sitting down, and working out was simply impossible. My feet, knees, hips, and back almost always hurt. Simply existing was exhausting. Even an eight-

day stay in the hospital for bronchitis and asthma wasn't enough of a wake-up-call for me. I went on like this for two years after that.

In August 2013, I went to my doctor for my annual work physical, and she set me straight.

“Your weight is a problem,” she said. “Have you tried to do anything about it?”

“Of course,” I said, immediately bursting into tears. “Nothing seems to work. I'm starting to think I'm just destined to be big.”

“I'm referring you to the Weight Loss Solutions guys downstairs. You should talk to them. They'll give you more info and they can help you do what you need to do so you can be healthy.”

Still bawling, I called my mom, who reassured me that maybe it was time I got real help with losing weight, and she would be there for me in any way I needed. I weighed the pros and cons, and I quickly made the decision that it was just **time**. Since I needed to lose weight, I also needed to work on my mental state so that I could keep it off. In a whirlwind few weeks, I had a first appointment at the clinic and weighed in at 285.1 pounds. This was an all-time high, and I was relieved that I was going to be getting help with losing it for good.

My first days with Optifast were not easy. I'd learned to regard food as a hobby; I spent hours after work grocery shopping, planning, preparing and cooking meals for my husband and I. I suddenly found myself bored in the afternoons, and it was a challenge to not fill the boredom with food. But darn it, I was NOT going to fail this time. I diligently drank my shakes, ate my bars and soups, and was just counting down days to my first

weigh in. I essentially quit my food blog. I posted a message to my readers entitled “Big Changes” and explained what I’d be doing.

“There are big changes happening here in Dinner-land...

I’ll be taking a break for an undetermined amount of time (12-21 weeks I think)

but you can follow my changes/journey on my new blog, Foodie Reset.”

I had started a new blog, without ads, without photographs, just for me at first, and entitled it “Foodie Reset.” My mission? To reset my brain from the food-centric place that it had become, to a sane and more normal place that viewed food as fuel only.

That first weigh in was nerve-wracking. After years of dreading the scale, I didn’t know what to do with the feeling of anticipation that I definitely should have been successful. And I was! My first week, I lost 8 pounds! That success gave me the little boost I needed to continue the program for another week.

As the weeks went on, the weight just came off. I noticed my clothes getting bigger, my face getting narrower, and my energy level rising. I began mild workouts, starting with simple walks around the neighborhood and eventually leading into full-on boot camp workouts. And the weight continued to drop... making shakes and eating bars and soups became second nature. My thoughts shifted from constantly thinking about food to thinking about how to occupy my time in ways that didn’t involve food. I found myself caught up at work, expanding my side business as a photographer, and spending more quality time with my husband, family, and friends.

Other things changed as well. At work, family functions, and even out in public, people stopped looking at me like I was going to drop dead at any moment. There was always this constant worry on everyone’s faces whenever I walked in or out of a room,

my food choices were scrutinized, and people would exclude me from activities simply because I was big. At my summer job at a day camp, staff and campers simply expected that I wouldn't participate in anything physical. People just got out of my way in stores, and I'm sure there were looks shared as I passed. As I got smaller, I had to speak up more to get through a crowd.

I'd had every intent on completing 16 weeks of the full Optifast program, but somewhere around week 11, I just couldn't fathom it anymore. I was tired of the shakes. The bars tasted like clay. The soups were just bowls of salt. I knew that the products hadn't changed, and it was my tastes that had. After discussing it with my doctor and dietician, we decided that I'd complete 13 full weeks of Optifast, and then transition to one meal a day of low-calorie, low-carbohydrate, high-protein foods over my winter break from work. I was terrified.

What was truly remarkable as I transitioned slowly to food was how little I needed to be satisfied. In the past, I'd need plates and plates of food to be even remotely finished eating, whereas my first few weeks of one meal involved a mere three ounces of protein and two cups of vegetables. Weeks went by, and the feeling of nervousness never really went away. Did I eat the right things? Did I measure accurately? But, as anxious as I was, the weight continued to come off at a steady rate.

As time has gone on, I'm continuing to add more and more real food to my daily intake, and fewer and fewer meal replacements. My daily food journals are much different now; instead of huge dinners full of pasta and cheese, it's day after day of four ounces of protein, two or three cups of vegetables, and low carbohydrate counts. I've recently added in yogurt, almonds, and cottage cheese to my daily snacks instead of my

meal replacement bars. At that initial doctor's appointment, my cholesterol level was at 263 and triglycerides were solidly in the 400s. Most recently, my cholesterol level has dropped to 167, and my triglycerides were 143. For the first time since middle school, my blood work levels are rated as "healthy." I also feel energized, younger, and healthier than I have since I was in college!

I'm far from "done." While yes, I still have weight to lose, I've realized that this is not something with an end date. I will need to be conscious of what I eat for the rest of my life. I'm learning that comfort eating does not do anything but make me uncomfortable. I'm learning that things I used to love to eat were causing me more problems than they are worth. I can still enjoy preparing and cooking food, but that doesn't mean that there needs to be a pound of cheese and pasta in every single meal. Most importantly, I've learned to love and trust myself to do what I need to do in order to succeed.

I had my doubts in the beginning. I had no idea I had this kind of strength and dedication hidden deep inside my then size-22 body. My motivation increased as my body size decreased, and with each and every progress picture I feel better and better about myself. It's not to say that I'll never slip, or that I won't ever gain back some weight. I have the tools now that will help me bounce back if that happens. I have every confidence that I'm healthy enough to do anything I want to do, including have a baby, when the time is right.