



up front

FROM FAT TO THIN

Yes, it's possible to lose weight and keep it off

By JASMINA WELLINGHOFF Photography LIZ GARZA-WILLIAMS

It seems that just about everybody wants to lose weight but, sadly, few succeed. Yet experts tell us that, as a nation, we must slim down or suffer all sorts of unpleasant consequences, such as poor health, impaired mobility and even shorter life spans.

To be sure, slimming down is not easy, but it's hardly impossible. Just ask the ladies we talked to for this article. Each one has shed more than 100 pounds. If there is a lesson in their stories, it's probably that seeking outside help, in whatever form suits you, makes weight loss easier to accomplish.

Read and be inspired!

LEARNING ABOUT HEALTHY NUTRITION WAS KEY

As a theater teacher at Earl Warren High School, 31-year-old Mandy Muniz is a very busy person. With six shows a year to produce, she often has days that

Teacher Mandy Muniz once tipped the scales at almost 300 pounds, but after 18 months of healthy and disciplined eating, she now wears size 4 jeans.

stretch into the night, what with rehearsals, costumes, set building, performances and a myriad of little things that must be taken care of in mounting a drama production.

"I direct all the plays," says Muniz. "It's a lot of work, and that's part of the reason I got fat."

Looking at the slim, blond young woman that she is now, it's hard to imagine that she's ever been overweight, let alone fat, but she has pictures to prove it. Focused on work for years, Muniz says she ate "whatever was convenient," often late at night. Her weight kept creeping up, but she didn't really know what to do about it. Even when she managed to lose 20 or 30 pounds on a particular diet, she would invariably regain it after returning to her usual ways.

"Once I got married, it got worse," she explains. "My husband liked steaks, tortillas, barbacoa and lots of stuff with starches and fat, so I found myself eating that as well. Gradually I got bigger and bigger."

She was size 18 in 1999. By 2005, the 5-foot-5-inch teacher was tipping the scales at 294 pounds while shopping for

sizes 24 or 25. Her back started to bother her, and she could not physically demonstrate to her students the moves she wanted them to do. Without openly criticizing her, her husband would occasionally hint that maybe she had become too big, which would only reduce her to tears.

What finally pushed her to look for change was seeing herself on tape in a student's film project. It was one of those horrifying moments when you realize that the fat lady in the picture is you. Three of her male colleagues who had slimmed down with the help of bariatric surgery urged her to do the same. But Muniz opted to give lifestyle changes another try. This time, she knew she needed outside help. With trepidation, she called the nearest LA Weight Loss Center.

"The first thing they asked was, 'How much do you want to lose?' I said 100, even though I really needed to lose more than that," recalls Muniz. "I thought they would laugh at me and send me to a surgeon, but they didn't flinch. Instead, they said, 'Come on in, let's get started.'"

At the center, counselors taught her about nutrition, healthful grocery shop-



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ping and portion control. They also devised a customized food plan that would allow her to lose weight without being hungry — whole grains, lean protein, fruits and vegetables. "Convenience" foods and late night binges went out the window. To her delight, four pounds came off that very first week. Then as the weeks and months passed and more pounds melted away — 3.2 a week, on the average — the plan was adjusted to fit her slimmer frame. Now, 18 months later, Muniz weighs a mere 124 pounds.

She still visits the center once a week to be weighed and measured and for a little support chat. In terms of inches, her "loss" comes to 71 1/2 inches. "That's a whole other me!" she exclaims as if still surprised by her transformation.

Slim and pretty as she is, Muniz nevertheless catches herself going to the big-sizes side of clothing racks while shopping. Not long ago, however, she experienced a moment of emotional epiphany while she was trying on a pair of size 6 jeans at The Gap. The pants seemed to swallow her. "I'll get you a 4," the salesperson said casually.

But there was nothing casual about it for Muniz. She called her mother and cried: "You won't believe it, I am buying size 4 jeans!"

In the last six months, Muniz has also incorporated regular exercise into her health regimen. In the morning, before she heads to school, she spends one hour on her stationary bike, then watches and follows her favorite TV workout gurus. Whenever she can, she also suggests alternative ways to spend leisure time with her nearest and dearest that do not include food — a walk in the park with her hubby, for instance, or a manicure with girl friends.

What she wasn't prepared for are the comments people make. Now that they feel she is out of the woods, friends say things like "I was so worried about your health." Or "Your skin looks so good now."

"Just because I lost weight shouldn't give people the right to comment on my life," she protests. Still, it's not a big deal. Life is definitely more fun nowadays. Her remarkable success led to a write-up in People magazine, followed by a trip to New York City to be interviewed on TV. She also went to Florida to shoot a com-

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

LA WEIGHT LOSS CENTERS: Basic program - \$9 per week until the goal is reached, maintenance optional; premier program - \$9 per week until the goal is reached plus \$9 per week through a year of maintenance. Those who successfully complete the entire program receive a rebate of 50 percent on their original payment.

JAZZERCISE: \$39 a month with a minimum commitment of three months. There is also a joining fee of \$75. You can choose to attend as many classes as you wish.

NEW DIMENSIONS WEIGHT LOSS SURGERY: Total cost of a gastric bypass with follow-up care is \$20,600. Some insurance plans cover it. Terry Hepworth took a loan.

OVEREATERS ANONYMOUS: No mandatory dues or fees but voluntary contributions of \$2 per meeting are used to pay for room rental, literature that's given free to new members and similar costs. Special workshops or retreats vary in price.

mercial for LA Weight Loss Centers. But most importantly, she now knows how to take care of herself.

"When you give your car premium gas, it runs smoothly," she says. "Living my life this healthy way is giving my body premium gasoline."

WHAT THEY EAT

MANDY MUNIZ

Breakfast: one egg; 1 cup blackberries; 8 ounces fat-free milk with 1/2 cup All-Bran cereal

Snack: LA Weight Loss protein bar; 1 cup sugar snap peas

Lunch: 6-ounce baked chicken breast with six baby carrots and 1 cup yellow squash; one small orange and six reduced-fat wheat thins

Snack: one slice light bread toasted with 1 teaspoon margarine, cinnamon and one packet of Splenda (cinnamon toast)

Dinner: 5 ounces tilapia; salad with 1 tablespoon fat-free dressing; 1 cup fat-free, no-sugar-added yogurt and strawberries

Mandy Muniz lost
167 pounds

Mandy Muniz as featured in
San Antonio Woman

