

Inside People: Inspiration a mystery, but weight loss is real

by R.J. Ignelzi

It's no mystery how Michelle Satren lost 95 pounds. She simply ate less and exercised more.

"Instead of eating three or four pieces of pizza, now I'll have just one. Maybe two if they're small," She said.

WISE WORDS - Despite the temptations of her jobs at Cheeburger Cheeburger Restaurant and the incredible Cheesecake Factory, Michelle Satren lost 95 pounds. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. ON HER WAY - Colette VandenBroeck, left, helps Michelle Satren with her fitness regimen. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. But why the 42-year-old cheesecake restaurant owner and cheeseburger restaurant manager began her weight-loss endeavor is more difficult to understand.

About three years ago, a close friend, whom Satren describes as "a very spiritual person," called her. Satren credits their conversation for triggering her transformation.

"She said she'd been thinking about me and something just came to her. She had to share it with me," said Satren with a slightly embarrassed laugh. "She told me to remember the word 'abandonment.' That was it. No explanation. Nothing. Just the word 'abandonment.'"

For some reason that neither Satren nor her friend can explain, that call or word affected her deeply.

"I still don't understand it, but I went into tailspin. I couldn't eat because I was so upset, and usually I eat more when I'm upset," said Satren, who at her heaviest weighed 255 pounds.

It wasn't until a few days after the phone call that Satren realized she was not only eating less food, but the food she was eating was also more nutritious.

Instead of a hefty sandwich and chips for lunch, she'd have just half a sandwich and skip the chips. Her high-calorie bagel-and-cream-cheese breakfast was replaced by some lean protein, like a boiled egg, low-fat cheese or low-sugar, high-fiber cereal.

It didn't take long for the pounds to start dropping off.

Although the beginning of her weight loss may have been a reaction to her friend's mysterious epiphany, her continued success was due strictly to her own motivation and perseverance.

When she realized the importance of nutrition and portion control, she made the conscious effort to eliminate fast food from her diet.

"That made a big difference. I didn't realize how much fast food I was eating," Satren said, noting that people wrongly assumed that her weight problem was due to eating too much cheesecake, when in reality "sweets and cheesecake have never been my thing."

"(Making the diet changes) didn't feel like a lot of effort. It came naturally to me. I just wanted to eat less and eat better."

Several months after starting her healthy eating regimen, her steady weight loss hit a plateau. She knew

she needed to add exercise to her program, so she joined the YMCA near her home in San Diego.

To make the most of her time and effort, she teamed up with Colette VandenBroeck, exercise physiologist and fitness director, who helped design a program for Satren to help her meet specific goals: weight loss, muscle toning and better posture.

"Michelle was the ideal client. She's very self-motivated and was very eager to learn a safe exercise program for herself," VandenBroeck said. "Every step of the way, everything we talked about and all that I showed her, she just ate it up. She was hungry for this kind of information, and she used it to be even more motivated and even more successful as time went on."

Between managing the restaurant and overseeing production at the cheesecake company, Satren puts in 13-hour days, seven days a week. Her hectic schedule means she often has to curtail the length of her workout sessions, but she still manages to squeeze in strength-training sessions, a run, elliptical training work or a class at the Y about five times a week.

"When it comes to exercise, a lot of people have this all-or-nothing attitude," said Satren, who had always been very active and athletic and never had a weight problem until her mid-20s. "If I can work out for only 10 minutes, it can set the tone for the entire day."

She demonstrates the same practical discipline in her diet. She tries not to deny herself any food, no matter how fattening.

Recently she craved chocolate chip cookies and milk. After a day or two of longing for the goodies, she went to the store and bought some.

"I didn't eat the whole bag or drink a whole half-gallon of milk like I would have done in the past," she said. "I don't think of that as cheating on a diet. I think of it as a treat."

The morning after her cookie fest, she went to the gym at 6:30 and worked out. Although Satren would like to lose another 15 pounds, she said she's "not beating myself up over it."

"Michelle understands that getting to a proper weight and fitness (level) is about a lifestyle, not a diet," VandenBroeck said. "The fact that she's still exercising five days a week, while working seven days a week, shows she gets it. She lives it."

And she seems to be living a happier, more satisfied life.

"When I was overweight, I just withdrew. I used my work for an excuse so I wouldn't have to go to parties," Satren said, admitting that she's usually regarded as fun and outgoing. "When I was at my heaviest, I didn't feel comfortable and I didn't feel pretty. I guess I didn't have much of a life."

She realizes when someone is as overweight as she was, it's not just about eating too much.

"It's about emotion," Satren said. "Something about that (call from her friend) made something click in my head. It shifted my thinking and I had to change my lifestyle."

Although she's not dating anyone, she "definitely has more interest in a social life now," she said. "When I started losing weight, I instantly started making myself more available."

Not only is Satren feeling better physically - slimmer, stronger, healthier - but her psyche has also improved.

"I feel like all that time I was overweight I was wearing a mask," she said. "But now the mask is off, and I don't have to worry about hiding behind it anymore."

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