



down sizing

At age fourteen, Rachael Lambin weighed more than 200 pounds. Then she decided to change her life, get healthy, and help other teens along the way.

Until I was about five years old, I was a skinny little girl. When I was five, my family moved from Illinois to Nevada, and I went to a new school. In first grade, they had things like pastries as snacks and pizza, chalupas, and fries covered in cheese for lunch. Around that time, my eating habits started getting really bad and I put on a lot of weight. I'd eat unhealthily at home because I thought, Well, I have this stuff at school, so why not? Around that time, I started getting made fun of a lot for being heavy. When kids called me names, it was really hard to take.

As I got older, my sizes kept getting bigger. I wanted to do something about my weight but I didn't know how. When I was twelve, my mom and I decided to try joining a gym. The first time we went, they took

**FAST FOOD NATION:
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my measurements and I weighed 160 pounds. Then, after a while of not going very regularly, I went back and I was more than 200 pounds - at five foot four. That day, I took a blood test and my cholesterol level was about three times as high as it should be for my age. That really scared me because, initially, I just wanted to lose weight to be accepted by people and fit into cute clothes. Now I was finding out it was a real health issue. I started learning more about childhood obesity and couldn't believe the numbers - the amount of overweight kids has more than doubled in the past 20 years.

I decided I needed to start getting serious. At first I tried a low-carb diet and I lost about 30 pounds. It was good because it showed me what it's like to stay motivated on a diet and see results. My whole family and I began going to the gym more regularly and seeing a nutritionist.

But I learned from the nutritionist that a low-carb diet isn't really good for you and that the proper way to lose weight is through balanced nutrition and exercise. (When I was on my first diet I *did* feel fatigued a lot, which was a result of eating too few carbs.) For my revised diet, I basically just cut down on bad stuff like sugar and fat. I slowly started feeling healthier.

MY WORLD: *down sizing*

Exercise had always been hard for me because I had asthma. But the more I started working out and losing weight, the less my asthma bothered me. Eventually I found that I didn't need to carry my inhaler around anymore. It was so weird when I started running on the treadmill without a problem - my asthma, it seems, was obesity-related. After talking to other teens who were overweight, I learned there are many health disorders that are linked to obesity, like type 2 diabetes [see "Feeding Frenzy" on page 222 for more], respiratory disorders, sleep apnea, and high blood pressure.

I've kept up my nutrition and exercise routine for three years now. At first my goal was to weigh 140 pounds, but now I'm about 130 and I'm focused on building muscle.



Getting healthy affected my confidence big-time. When I got down to my goal weight, it felt so good. I was totally cheering and dancing around. The best part was finding clothes that had never fit before - and not having to ask salespeople for the bigger sizes.

Back when I was heavier, I kept wishing there was something for kids that would help encourage us to stay healthy. It seemed like everything was geared toward adults. That's when I had the idea for a group aimed at teens called HOPE, which stands for Helping Obese People through Education. When I first came up with the idea, I didn't do anything about it because I thought, If I can't even lose weight myself, how can I tell everyone else how to? But as I became more active, I was able to see myself teaching people.

As soon as I got close to my goal weight, I created HOPE in order to educate young people and encourage them to make nutritious food choices. The group gets together several times a month and we do everything from meeting with personal trainers to going to supermarkets with a nutritionist, to heading on trips where we cross-country ski, hike, golf, and kayak. Basically the thinking is that a healthy lifestyle doesn't have to be boring. I think if people know more about HOPE, they might be interested in starting chapters in their area (right now it's in Nevada, California, Illinois, and Utah) - maybe it can even grow internationally.

For me, the best events HOPE puts together are cooking sessions where a guest chef comes in and teaches us how to make delicious (and healthy) meals. We learn about cutting down on sugar intake and choosing whole grains over "whites" like plain bread. (For more on healthy cooking, see "Lean Cuisine," right.) Kids and families who attend these events get information about how to change their lifestyle for the better without feeling pressured. I remember when I decided to lose weight, I felt helpless - it seemed so hard and I didn't know where to begin. I'd like to think that HOPE could provide motivation for the people who get involved.

After losing 75 pounds myself, I can sympathize with my peers who are struggling with their weight. One of the most important things you need to get healthy and make the weight loss last is a strong support system. So it's difficult seeing my friends learn new things at HOPE and then not get the backup at home that they need from their families. The good thing is that all the teens in HOPE can help each other, even if they don't have the same family support.

In just four years, we've helped more than 2,000 kids, and the organization has 50 volunteers. My goal is to keep HOPE growing and spread a healthy message to as many teens as possible. Changing my eating and exercise habits made such a huge difference in my life - I want to tell other kids about how serious obesity is and how it's possible for them to do something about it.