

Couple uses lessons of 'Biggest Loser' to learn healthy living

By CASSANDRA SPRATLING

A year ago, Pete Thomas was twice the man he is today. Years of inactivity and poor eating had put 401 pounds on his 6-foot -5 frame. His wife, Pam, was overweight too. At 5-foot-8, she weighed 269 pounds. She blamed it on her family tree.

He blamed getting older, getting married and not getting out and shooting hoops with the fellas the way he used to before they married in 1991.

Like a lot of married couples, gaining weight was one thing they did together.

Then last year, Pam, 38, convinced Pete, 37, that they should audition for the hit NBC weight-loss reality show "The Biggest Loser." They sent an audition tape to compete as a couple, but the couples' slots were full. The producers, though, invited Pete to fill a slot on a team of men.

His journey to fitness began about a year ago and has transformed the couple's lives. It has strengthened their marriage and married them to a new mission: advocating for healthier lifestyles for individuals and families.

Producers called him last February. Three months later, he was voted off the show because he had a low weight-loss week: 7 pounds.

But Pete ended up a winner. He came home to Ypsilanti, Mich., 83 pounds thinner and armed with an arsenal of fat-fighting knowledge, a new workout regimen and renewed determination and optimism to continue losing and keep it off. He also came home to a thinner wife.

While he was away working out with celebrity trainer Jillian Michaels and learning to eat healthfully, Pam lost 30 pounds alone: by drastically cutting back on the amount and kinds of foods she ate and several hours a day of brisk walking on the treadmill that dominates the dining space of the couple's apartment.

"I was determined that he was not coming back and being skinny by himself," Pam said. "I stayed on that treadmill and I ate the very minimum."

After his return home, the couple - who met while they were University of Michigan students - united their efforts to continue to lose weight. They began the night he came home with a trip to the local Meijer's. They loaded their carts with low-calorie groceries.

Pam had been on a near-starvation diet. Using knowledge he learned on the show, Pete taught her how to enjoy eating and still lose weight.

"Modification, not starvation," became the mantra that he taught his wife and that they both now teach to others.

They're frequent speakers at churches and community groups. The show made him so popular he's had to hire someone to help keep his schedule.

Last month, Pete was featured on the religious TV show "The 700 Club." The couple has been on ABC's "The View" and they're the cover story this month of Real Health Magazine. In April, they'll be featured in the on line magazine KeepingFamilyFirst.org.

Pete's fame was further boosted in November when he won \$100,000 for having lost the highest percentage of weight among those voted off the show.

He had continued to lose weight, shrinking to 216 pounds, 4 below his goal.

Pam weighs 199 pounds now, with a goal of 180 pounds.

The couple has made spreading the weight-loss word a mission.

"I have a biblical belief that 'To whom much is given, much is required' so I feel a Christian duty to share what I have

learned with others since I believe that God has blessed me in the first place," he said. "This is also why we gave away the first 25 percent of our winnings to charity."

The rest was invested in fitness equipment, saved or put into the family business, Gideon Investment Group, a real estate investment and property management company.

He believes losing weight may have saved his life because he tired easily, was borderline diabetic and close to having high blood pressure. "I knew it was just a matter of time before my body broke down," he said.

The couple said there are three keys to their weight loss, which Pete learned from being on the show: reducing calories, consistent challenging exercise and supporting each other.

Once they started counting calories, Pam realized that in one date night alone - movies and dinner - they were consuming more calories than they needed for three days.

"It's not just a matter of cutting back or cutting out certain foods," Pete said. "It's really about figuring out how much fuel your body needs and sticking with an exercise program that continually challenges you."

Losing weight has made them a healthier, happier, more productive couple, they say.

And they're planning to have children.

"When we were big, there was a fear that we would not be around long enough to raise our kids due to our health problems," Pete said. "Now we're more productive. Our business is going like gangbusters and that's because we have more energy to put into it. "

Weight loss has even changed the way they vacation.

"We used to plan our vacations around eating, like OK, we're going to Chicago so we can go to the Cheesecake Factory," she said. "Now our vacations are more activity related." During their last trip to Chicago, they biked along the city's lakeshore and walked around the museums. During a California trip, they went hiking - experiences they enjoyed.

"Anytime you go through a struggle and triumph together, it makes you stronger," Pete said. "For us that struggle was losing weight."

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