

a Recipe for Success

by David Fouts



y most standards of measure, I was an average size child. By the time I was in fifth grade, I began putting on a few extra pounds. A few extra pounds very easily multiplied into 100 extra pounds and then effortlessly ballooned into 200 extra pounds. I went from fifth grade to high school in what seemed like minutes instead of years.

I became known as “The Happy Fat Guy” at five foot eight inches tall, tipping the scales at 380 pounds. And so began my journey to what ultimately brought me to where I am today. I am happy to announce that I am no longer a “fat guy” and very proud to say that I provide a service to people who are struggling to overcome the very same disease that I suffered from for so long – morbid obesity. I feel so fortunate to be able to be in a profession that I have such passion for. I consider this my personal mission now: To educate a very select group of people who have chosen to fight for their lives and regain a sense of control and normalcy over what most people consider one of the finest pleasures in life – FOOD! Today I travel all over the country demonstrating to bariatric surgery patients how to prepare their food, so this pleasure can once again be enjoyed without fear of losing control ever again.



My family’s cooking talent was quite evident early on. I have no doubt that watching my Great Granny “do her magic” by turning flour, lard and buttermilk into the most amazing biscuits on the planet, contributed to the way I became accustomed to eating throughout my childhood. I was always right there under foot, helping to prepare the meal, feeling confident that I would get to taste everything to see if it needed “a bit of this” or “a bit of that” and then retaste “just to make sure.” And my mother, following right behind in their footsteps, was fortunate enough to acquire the same cooking talents and skills as her mother and grandmother. As a family, we always sat down to the dinner table and enjoyed family mealtime. The “supper table” was a wonderful time of fellowship and togetherness, making dinner the highlight of our day. We discussed the events of that day, and shared family history and funny memories. It was also

here that we were told about the children in poor countries who had no food to eat, thus shaming my siblings and myself into becoming good little members of the “Clean Your Plate Club.”

Family holidays, birthdays and all other celebrations for that matter, revolved around the menu for the occasion. Both sides of my family are from the southeast where foods such as fried chicken, fried pork chops, country fried steak and potatoes with gravy, rice and the like, were staples. Of course we always made sure to balance our meals with healthy vegetables – as long as they were flavored with bacon fat! Oh, and those desserts, just one dessert gracing our dinner table was hardly enough. In fact, dessert was the main focus of the meal; everyone always making sure they “saved room” for some banana pudding or sweet potato pie. And then after the clean-up, ultimately relaxing with coffee and yet more

sweets, listening to the entire family brag about the meal that day and what good cooks they all were. It's really no wonder that I was transfixed by the idea of food preparation, which eventually led me to culinary school.

Today, my family is still very close knit and involved in each other's lives almost daily. I was born in West Palm Beach, Florida and live there to this day. My parents divorced when I was 11-years-old. My mother eventually remarried and my new immediate family was a combined "his, her and ours," instantly making me one of eight children almost overnight. I spent most of my life not only being the oldest son, but the biggest as well. Today, my younger siblings refer to me as their "Little Big Brother," a term that is new and strange to me, but one that I love to hear. I am still surprised when I hear someone commenting on how much we all resemble each other as brothers, realizing it is because I have just one chin now, just like they do!

During elementary school, I outgrew/outsize my classmates by leaps and bounds. By the time I reached middle school, I had very few school friends left. By "hanging out" with my older sister, who was my best buddy, I was not as isolated as many obese children sadly are. Her friends became my friends and I was known as the jolly funny guy whom everyone loved to be around. I even took a liking to my new nickname "Heavy-D." Happy on the exterior, I was a sad little boy on the inside, longing to wear the same stylish clothes that other kids my age wore. Not only were clothes difficult to find in my size, but they were prohibitively expensive. If my mom came upon an article of clothing that was stylish and also available in my size, she would purchase one in every color available. By age eleven, I



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the cummerbund got a little tighter, it was time to stop eating for a day. The nickname "Heavy-D" followed me to high school and through graduation. By this time, I had my mind set on making a career out of cooking. The only natural choice for a teenage boy fresh out of high school was to take a job at a local pizza parlor. I prepared the pizza, learned a little bit about cooking, and was happy as a clam to eat all of the "mistakes". Of course, six months after high school graduation when I tried on that cummerbund just as a point of reference, it no longer wrapped around my middle. I was on the road to undoing everything I strived for during the prior four years. I was rapidly growing back into an obese person and there was nothing I could do to control or stop it.

had already outgrown "Husky" sizes. As a last resort, my mom would take me to the men's department of a department store where the salespeople, much to my embarrassment, would have to set me up for costly alterations to make these men's clothes fit a chubby teenage boy's body. Because I was so large around my ever-growing stomach area, to make clothes fit was a challenge. It they fit in the stomach, they were baggy everywhere else. If they fit everywhere else, they were tight in the stomach. It was a vicious cycle that I did not enjoy, and shopping for new clothes was a chore that I came to despise.

My high school years were fairly enjoyable and were substantially better than middle school. I worked extremely diligently to shape up and was able to reduce in weight to a reasonable size. I joined the high school choir and excelled with my musical talents. I knew that in order for my tuxedo cummerbund to fit, I had to maintain a certain weight and used this as a measure to "get back on track". When

Operating a fast food restaurant was my first experience in management. This is where I met my wife, me being the manager and Mary working for me. I was 18 going on 19 and she was 15 at the time. We dated for five years, a relatively long courtship, before tying the knot. I weighed 250 pounds when I met Mary and was up to 380 pounds by the time I decided to have weight loss surgery. I knew she loved and supported me no matter what my weight ballooned to. Soon after we got married, we mapped out a plan for our future. I was going to go to school for training as a chef and she would go to school to become a teacher. We both knew we wanted to start a family right away and both feel blessed with our two wonderful boys, Noah and Michael, ages 5 years and 21 months, respectively.

Eventually I enrolled at the Florida Culinary Institute where I completed my education and proudly can boast a 4.0 GPA. Finally, I was able to venture into the culinary world as a professional, no longer having to accept jobs at "pizza joints." Having a degree in Culinary Arts has afforded me such opportunities as working at a five star, five diamond resort, working at a vegetarian health institute, as well as being a personal chef for a wonderful private family. I thoroughly enjoyed my new career and felt I was finally doing what I love. I focused all of my energies on being the best dad and husband I could be, talking myself into believing I was happy at my heaviest weight. I was running a small family owned café as well as a home delivery meal service, working from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily, going home completely exhausted at the end of each day.

During every holiday season I have enjoyed preparing the annual Christmas dinner at my church, and Christmas of 2001 was a year to always remember. The group was larger than ever that particular season, approximately 350 people. The event was spread over two consecutive nights and by the time day two was over, I was completely drained and physically unable to move. I remember hearing my own heart pounding, thinking it sounded as if it would explode. My feet ached so badly I could hardly walk and I remember being practically incapacitated for almost two days following that event. I could not un-

derstand how or why I could have complete control over professional goals, was successful in family and career, while at the same time have a complete and utter lack of control with my health and weight. My life seemed full, and yet I was slowly killing myself, sabotaging my own happiness and health, while putting my family at risk of losing a father, husband, brother and son. I knew there had to be more to this life. There was something else I needed to do and I had to take action quickly.

Happy in my career, I was slowly becoming handicapped because of my weight. The jobs I had taken on in the past required me to be on my feet all day long. I had to bend down and lift heavy cooking objects and was finding these tasks more difficult with each passing day. I simply could not continue on this way. I found myself missing out on wonderful opportunities, knowing the reason someone else was chosen for the job was because they fit the image more appropriately than an obese person did. I felt confident that I possessed the qualifications, but sadly, could not keep up physically with job demands, both in image and endurance, because of my weight. To be taken seriously, I was certain that I must get healthy in order to pursue my career goals and needed to "fit the image" that society forces upon us.

After my first son, Noah, was born, I began to research gastric bypass surgery. From the moment I first laid my eyes upon this tiny little being that I created, I knew he needed me to stick around for a long time. I was not willing to jeopardize this from happening any longer. At the weight I was then, close to 400 pounds, I could not be an effective father to my son. I would not be able to play ball with him, nor take him swimming or fishing, let alone run around after him. I could never imagine such a selfless love, but here it was, telling me to change not for myself any longer, but for this boy who needed a dad. A dad who would be there to watch him grow into a man, graduate from high school, be there for all of life's events – good and bad, thick or thin. How could I possibly promise that to my son or to myself, when I was a time bomb waiting to happen? One evening while watching television, I viewed a special on gastric bypass surgery. I knew at that very moment that my hopes and

prayers had been answered and I had found my solution. I began tirelessly researching, overcame resistance from friends and family members, and have never looked back since that very day.

I clearly remember initial conversations with my wife about weight loss surgery. Although she was supportive, she was also hesitant because of the risks involved. In the end, it was her unyielding support that guided me through the procedure with flying colors. When I broached the subject with my mother, who was morbidly obese herself, I did not encounter the same support. In fact, my mother was sure I had lost my mind! My sister was hesitant, but supported my decision. None of the resistance stopped me and the process was soon underway – insurance company hoops, psychological testing, visits to the cardiologist and pulmonologist, support group attendance – I did whatever was necessary to make surgery a reality for myself. And so, on January 28, 2002, my journey began, on the day I now refer to as “My New Birthday.”

Weight just seemed to “fall off” after my surgery. I was strict about the diet protocol, preparing my food according to the stringent guidelines imposed upon me by my surgeon. Being a chef, I began to invent new and better methods of preparing my food so getting protein intake wouldn't be such a challenge, as it is for most bariatric surgery patients. I started keeping a written record of my recipes, as well as notes on what had worked and what had failed. I was more than happy to share my recipes with fellow patients and soon, I was being sought out by patients for innovative ideas on food preparation. Being an avid attendee at all support group meetings, I met dieticians, nurses and the physicians from my surgeon's practice. Soon thereafter,



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take-out or delivery of meals is extremely prevalent in the obese population; we begin to eat in private and start hiding what we eat from others due to embarrassment about the quantities we consume. Hence, cooking was a whole new experience for most of the patients in my groups, and they grasped this new skill with open arms, making me feel welcome from the moment I stepped into the room. I am extremely proud to report on several patients who have found a passion for cooking; becoming gourmet cooks themselves, and feel honored to have been an inspiration as such.

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I was given the opportunity to cook and share my ideas at a convention for bariatric surgery patients. I was asked to demonstrate at a “breakout session” during a national seminar and quickly learned that my class had been given wonderful reviews.

I was in the midst of losing the remainder of my 200 excess pounds when I was offered an opportunity to work for one of the largest and most respected surgical practices in the country, as their exclusive Executive Chef, which I eagerly and proudly accepted. My role was to instruct their patients on cooking techniques and methods of preparing food, especially protein dishes. It was an enthusiastic experience to be in a forum where I could show patients how food can taste wonderful and be healthy at the same time. It was through these demonstrations and hearing about the food challenges patients were having, that helped doctors realize that obese people rarely cook. The average obese individual eats out routinely, eating food prepared by someone other than themselves. Restaurant meals,

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As a physician who has helped care for many patients with morbid obesity, I've seen the difficulties and health problems associated with this disease. **Obese patients have an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis and a multitude of other health concerns.** Often, they suffer from decreased energy levels and depression due to their weight. These health issues affect millions of people considered to be overweight by BMI standards as well. Because most of these patients have limited success with dieting and exercise and most of the FDA approved drugs for weight loss have unwanted side effects, a number of surgical procedures have been performed over the past few years to assist morbidly obese patients with successful long-term weight loss. **In 2002, 67,000 patients had bariatric surgery and it's estimated that more than 144,000 patients had the surgery by the end of 2004. Still with the rising obesity crisis, this number is expected to double by year end 2005 – that's a 500% growth rate in just three years.**

Today, the most common type of surgery performed for weight loss is the gastric bypass. This procedure has two components that allow patients to lose a significant amount of weight in a fairly short amount of time. A small stomach is created (which helps the patient eat less), and then a portion of the intestines are bypassed so that the food does not come into contact with the digestive enzymes until later on in the digestive tract. This helps to reduce the amount of calories absorbed by the body. A decreased amount of actual food intake each day combined with less absorption by the digestive tract allows patients to lose the weight. However, patients and their physicians need to be aware of their vitamin, mineral and nutrient intake. Many patients can develop vitamin and mineral deficiencies after the surgery. **This is where Alvitum™ can help.**

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- Roger D. Moccia, M.D.

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Chef Dave and his family, wife Mary and sons, Michael, center and Noah.

that food will no longer be enjoyable. This could not be farther from the truth and in fact, is a widely believed myth among patients awaiting their surgery date. After surgery patients begin to eat the “filet mignon of food for life,” eating only the best and healthiest of foods. Eating will always be a part of our lives and learning to eat in moderation and focusing on new and different aspects of life, instead of food, will take some getting used to. By sharing my experiences as both a patient and a chef, I am able to place my handprint on patients’ lives. And this, in and of itself, has brought me to a brand new direction in my own life, one with a very private and personal meaning now.

All too often while at a cooking seminar, I overhear mutters and gasps from patients who are surprised to discover they can comfortably “get down” or “keep down” a certain type of meat or poultry I have prepared for them.

Many patients have yet to grasp the basic concept of cooking. I try to instill in them that various meat and fish dishes require different cooking techniques in order to maintain a tender and juicy texture. Consuming a full four ounces of protein can be quite a challenge to a bariatric patient, especially when the concept of not being hungry is mixed with food being prepared in a way that is not “pouch friendly.” The issue of food not breaking up into small enough pieces to enable passage through the new pouch is a tremendous problem for a bariatric patient. I am overjoyed when I witness patients sampling protein food choices at seminars and seeing the look of awe on their faces when food passes through so easily. Whether working with a group of 300 patients, or with an individual who pulls me aside with a specific issue, I understand the need for education and a listening ear. My first cookbook, *Culinary Classics* received rave re-

views and sold like hotcakes on both Amazon and at seminars. Over the past few years, I have traveled to many different venues to promote my book, as well as held private signings during my demonstrations. The initial 10,000 copies that went into print on a trial basis quickly sold out. Currently, there are no additional copies of “*Culinary Classics*” available, and I am awaiting a subsequent edition to go to print in the near future.

Each and every day that passes now, I become increasingly passionate about my profession. I feel so fortunate to be able to meet and talk to obese people who are just beginning to appreciate their lives and are as equally excited about life as I have found myself to be. More importantly, we now know how worthwhile it is to live and enjoy our lives as healthy human beings. My journey has allowed me to work with such motivational speakers in the WLS field as Barbara Thompson, Colleen Cook and Carnie Wilson. We are all so different, and yet, have this deep connection, being patients ourselves. Individual life experiences are very different and we each have our own unique style of presenting our stories. However it is said or told, the bottom line is, each and every one of us is your biggest fan.

I must preface this paragraph with reminding you about my mother’s reaction when I informed her of my decision to undergo bariatric surgery. After much protest, all the while still watching my progress ever so closely, seeing first hand how much healthier I was becoming and losing weight quite readily, she ended up making that same decision herself a short eight months after my new “birthday.” Today, she enjoys traveling, accompanying me quite often to various cities for seminars or conventions in which I have been engaged to demonstrate or



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make a presentation. When we travel by air, we still glance at each other and smile, hardly believing that four short years ago neither one of us even fit in an airplane seat. We use these short business trips to laugh and enjoy life, quite often revisiting that first conversation we had when I single-handedly decided to be the “family pioneer” and undergo Roux-en-Y gastric bypass surgery, much to her dismay. She thanks me, each and every chance she gets, for leading us to our new world of wonder. On the mornings when our schedules allow for an exercise walk together, we inevitably begin discussing how we wish everyone suffering from morbid obesity could walk in our shoes and see life through our eyes, even if only long enough to allow them to have an open mind about the procedure. Since my mom and I had our bariatric surgeries, four additional members of my immediate family have undergone the same procedure, losing an inordinate amount of excess weight. I am happy to report that today at family get-togethers, we have a new focus. First and foremost, we celebrate our accomplishments and hard work, never losing sight of our newly found healthy and balanced lifestyles. Food, of course, still remains as a major focus, but the pain and guilt over how we handle it is gone.

Life itself, has settled down quite a bit for me. Both my wife and I never veered off that road we had mapped out for ourselves. We have our two beautiful boys, I attained my goals of completing culinary school and my wife Mary pursued her career as well, now teaching third grade at an elementary school in West Palm Beach. My children have a dad who is active and present in their lives. They get into everything, just as other children do. But now, I am able to keep up and catch up! My older boy, Noah,

might very well be following in his dad's footsteps as a chef one day. He has a complete kitchen set, including his very own pots and pans with spatulas and whisk, and his own chef's hat, coat and pants! My wife says that Noah can crack an egg just as professionally as I do, and he is always under foot, reminding me of myself watching my Great Granny magically whip up those biscuits! My wife and I have extensively researched obesity in children, knowing all too well that this disease is hereditary. We never ask our children to be good little members of the "Clean Your Plate Club," ever encouraging them to eat in a healthy way. We try to be good examples for our boys, and hopefully, they will never have to deal with obesity like their father did.

When *WLS Lifestyles* magazine approached me about writing an article for this issue, I readily accepted, knowing the holiday season brings with it many challenges for patients. During these next few winter months, there will be an abundance of holiday events taking place in each of our lives. Many of them we are obligated to attend, for some, we can give our regrets. My motto with respect to food during this holiday season is "So much food, such a little pouch!" Just close your eyes for a minute and imagine the ease now of watching a holiday parade and being



Chef Dave and the inspiration for his weight loss surgery, son Noah.

obese people, these are all things we gave up or slowly lost over the years. We now have these simple pleasures back once again, and with a vengeance. Each time you realize one new activity you are able to once again participate in, or an accomplishment, please know you have overcome a monumental hurdle. You did not "take the easy way out" as many of you have heard. Instead, you took steps to save your life and now it is time to live that life to its fullest. Remember guilt is a worthless emotion when it comes to food. Guilt, in most cases, makes you eat more. Making a food choice for that particular meal should not dictate the rest of your day, week, or year. Take charge and start enjoying the simple pleasures all over again; you worked hard for this and you deserve it!

Happy Holidays to all my fellow weight loss surgery friends, and let's all begin the New Year with a fresh and healthy start! ■

able to stand for an hour without pain; or, actually sitting on the floor (and being able to get up again) when wrapping holiday gifts; or the ability to hold your 3-year-old on your shoulders to get a better view of Santa; or jumping up to answer the doorbell when guests arrive. These are simple pleasures that most people take for granted. As

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