



Mississippi Epidemiologist Loses 58 Lbs And 22% Of Body Weight To Win Fitness Challenge

The well-known Nike slogan “Just do it” might best explain Mississippi epidemiologist Larry Smith’s decision to join the Fit 4 Change Fitness Challenge in his home town of Jackson Mississippi. Smith, a staff officer in the Division of Medicaid in the Office of the Governor, received an email last year inviting him to apply for a slot in an annual event in January designed to get legislators and others to lose weight as an example for others. Mississippi ranks high in the United States for having the most obese residents.

Smith told the Epi Monitor that he had struggled with his weight for many years and decided that at age 63 and weighing 262 lbs at 5’10”, he could just not put off losing weight any longer. He said he felt miserable, and worn out, especially after playing with his three grandchildren. I wanted to feel better about myself, he told the Monitor, live longer and be around to see my grandkids achieve their life milestones.

Secret To Success

When asked about his secret to success, Smith replied “I just did what they told me to do.” Well he did that much and more to win the competition which included approximately 200 other contestants. For one thing, he persevered despite feeling like he was going to die after the first day’s exercise and thinking “there’s no way I can finish this.”

Schedule

Beginning in January, Smith arose at 4am five days a week to drive to a boot-camp like exercise session beginning at 5 am for one hour. In addition, he spent an hour on a treadmill every evening. Also, he learned to like new foods. “My weakness, he told the Monitor, is mayonnaise. I like to smother my sandwiches with it. However, since January I have learned to substitute fat free Greek yogurt and found that very acceptable.”

More Loss

Smith’s success did not end after 12 weeks. In the last month and a half, he has continued to lose weight and how has lost a total of 70 lbs. According to Smith, he runs 6 miles per day about every day, does aerobic step exercises, and even some kick boxing. Overall, he estimates that he exercises about two hours per day on average. On the food side, he eats more vegetables, and white meat such as chicken and fish, and he has largely cut out red meat. I learned he said that it takes a combination of both increased exercise and a better diet to lose weight.

Smith has objective evidence of improving his health. His blood pressure is now in normal range (120/80), his glucose is normal, and his cholesterol dropped by 50 points, he said.

Epi Perspective

Asked if being an epidemiologist gave him any advantage in his fitness challenge, he said no. Although he knew what to do for a long time, he said that did not make it any easier for him. However, he admitted that understanding what was happening to him and why his plan was working was a good thing. Also, he acknowledged learning that successful weight loss is not an event but a behavior change, and epidemiology reinforced that concept.



An obvious question for Smith is what his long term weight loss goal is and what he thinks about maintaining what he has achieved. He told the Monitor he would like to be in the 170-175 lbs range and live a life that does not feel deprived. He said he does not miss things he used to eat. "I don't get up asking what can I eat today," he said. "I believe it is what you get used to," he added.

Message

Asked what he would tell his fellow epidemiologists about his weight loss, he mentioned the importance of the team concept or herd mentality in losing weight, and he also profited from the experience to create a new friendship with a person he now runs with each week. He has also had his 15 minutes of fame since he was interviewed on CNN and was congratulated by people at work and former colleagues in the health department.

Tenacity

Smith's tenacity it turns out has been on display not only from his participation in the fitness program, but also in relation to his graduate education. Smith worked as an environmental engineer for the first half of his career and then decided to pursue a doctoral degree at age 50. He was disillusioned with the focus on the almighty dollar in the environmental engineering area, he said, and went on to earn his PhD in the Division of Epidemiology at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. He graduated and obtained his current position as the first ever epidemiologist in the Division of Medicaid. His work involves examining trends, preparing reports, and doing statistical analyses for the program.