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Fat chance

INSPIRATION | RUNNER-UP
CONTESTANT NEVER LOST FAITH
DURING 'BIGGEST LOSER' CONTEST

"For once, I could see the Julie that God intended me to be, the less-burdened woman who had been hiding within."

Julie Hadden in "Fat Chance"

BY CARLA HINTON
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However, Hadden, who lives in Jacksonville, Fla., with her husband, Mike, and sons Noah and Jaxon, had a strategy that included hard work and faith in God.

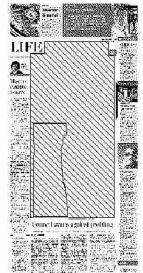
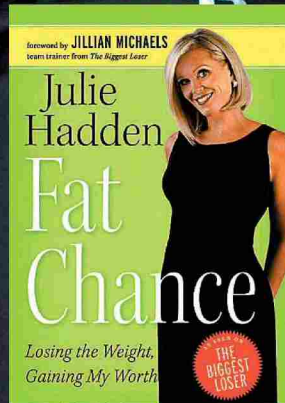
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Hadden, 37, tells of her weight-loss journey on "The Biggest Loser" in her new faith-inspired book, "Fat Chance: Losing the Weight, Gaining My Worth" (Guideposts Books, \$22). As Season 4 first runner-up, Hadden lost 97 pounds, going from 218 to 121 to become the season's most successful female contestant.

In this question-and-answer session, the weight-loss champion talks about "Fat Chance," "The Biggest Loser" and her life since leaving the reality TV show's fitness ranch:

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Q: What made you decide to write "Fat Chance"?

A: I will be brutally honest. It was never my plan. ... I came home from the show for eight months, and I was physically and emo-

tionally exhausted. It's a lot of work. I was kind of over "The Biggest Loser," and I was ready to get back to real life and being a mom. But everywhere I went, I couldn't get away from it. I went to Walmart and the grocery store; people would come up to me and some of them would start weeping and they say, "If you can do it, I can do it" and they would share all these amazing, humbling and inspiring things. My husband would always be with me and he would say, "I'll be on Aisle 5." So, he said to me, "I really think you should write a book." I realize now that that was what God wanted me to do so I could reach as many people and give them hope.

Q: You say kind of right off the bat that your teammates knew of your faith and that it was important to you. There's a line in the book where you say they said, "All you have to do is start the church of Hadden and we'll follow you." How do you think your faith helped you deal with the show and everything that came with it?

A: I think that at first, this is going to sound really ironic, that my faith hindered me, and I'll tell you why. I spent my whole life trying to please God. We're taught from the time we are children that your body is a temple and you are supposed to treat it with respect, all of these things. To be perfectly honest, I had kind of treated mine like a fairground, and I really felt like God was mad at me, and so I struggled with that. Here I was, asking Him for a miracle. But at the same time, I felt like I had disappointed Him so

many times in the past. When things started to change for me was when I caught a glimpse of how God truly saw me. I defined myself by what I saw in the mirror. They take away everything you love when you go on that TV show. You have no outside communication, no TV, no radio, no letters from home, no calls, so you are left alone with your thoughts and for me, my heavenly Father. And all of a sudden, all these Scriptures that I had heard as a child started coming back to me, and it was like I was hearing them for the first time. ...

When I started to realize how precious I am to Him and realized that the image that He saw when He looked at me was not the image that I had created looking back at me in the mirror, then everything changed. My faith became the strongest part of my whole, entire journey.

Q: There are several things that happened to you as a result of being on the show. You consider them blessings. Can you talk about them?

A: It was the most amazing story that came out of my transformation. Before I went on the show, I had been diagnosed with polycysticovarian syndrome, which is the leading cause of infertility in America. I had struggled for years to have a baby. ... Nobody likes being first runner-up; that was not my plan with God. I was going to win, and I would have \$250,000, and I could do whatever I wanted. That was my goal. It didn't end up that way. I lost percentage-wise by 8 pounds.



I was really struggling with that. I was happy with my new life, but I said, "OK God, I lost by 8 pounds." That's like one week in "Biggest Loser" land. I didn't understand. Remember David and Goliath? To be the smallest girl and beat all these boys, that was the plan. But what I didn't realize is that His plan for me had already unfolded. In retrospect, three weeks after the finale, through a miraculous stream of events, my husband, Mike, and I ended up adopting a baby. Later on, I would realize that I was cast on the show in April and a girl in my hometown found out she was pregnant in April, so the whole time that I was whining and complaining that I wanted to have a baby, he was already being formed and God was already orchestrating it. Silly Julie; had I won, I would never have been able to receive what I wanted in the first place (because of the traveling and other commitments required of each season's winner), and so His plan for me is so much greater. I lost by 8 pounds, and that's exactly what Jaxon weighed when I brought him home. That's not a mistake to Him. It was an exact illustration that He laid out for me that His plans for me are so much bigger than my own.

Q: How are you maintaining your weight loss?

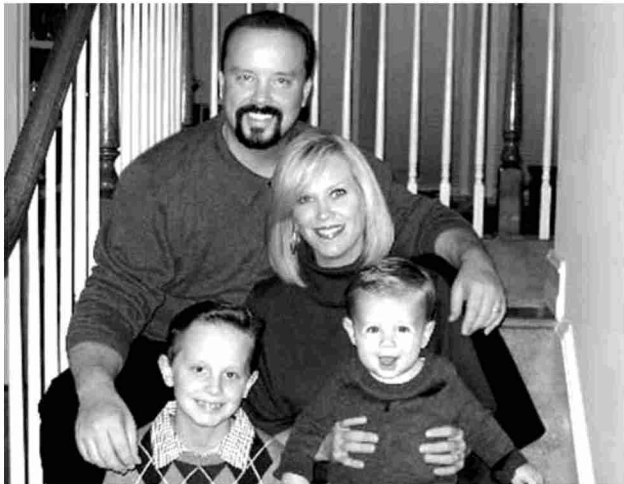
A: To be honest, it's been harder for me than losing the weight. For 35 years, I spent my life gaining the weight, so I was really good at that. And then for eight months, I was indoctrinated into this atmosphere where I learned really quickly how to lose

weight. But I had no idea how to live a balanced life. When I came home, I was petrified because I had changed but nothing else in my life had changed. It's been a learning process. The doctors from the show said that if you've been morbidly obese, you are going to have to work out an hour to an hour and a half six days a week, and I thought they were crazy. I thought, "I lost this weight; I'm fine." I realized very quickly they were telling the truth because in the first couple of months back home, I gained 10 pounds back just by changing little things like saying, "Oh, I don't need to drink water; I can drink Diet Coke. I don't really need to eat breakfast today; I'll just eat a bigger lunch" – old habits. So, it's been a learning process.

Q: If you were going to give any weight-loss advice, what would it be?

A: Well, there is some practical advice. People spend all year making bad decisions and then they decide that Jan. 1, their whole life is going to change. I think you need to set small, achievable goals. Realize that each day is a new day. When you reach those goals, celebrate – not with food, but find other ways to celebrate. The other thing I would say is things that are practical in my own life, like the way I look at food and calories. I think of my calories as money now. If you had \$1,200 and went to the mall and you spent \$500, would you say, "Well, I've spent \$500, I might as well spend the other \$700"? No, you would say, "I've still got to pay my rent and

my car payment. I'd better be extra careful with these \$700 I have left." That's how I tend to look at my calories now. If I eat something that's high in calories now, I know I need to be super careful with the rest of my calories that day. I don't wait until the next day and start over. The most valuable thing I can say to someone is if you are starting a new year and you are starting fresh, it's not just about diet and exercise; it's about finding value in your life, because what you value, you will treat better. If you treat yourself better, automatically diet and exercise will be involved in that. ... If you really value your health and your body, you'll treat it differently.



Julie Hadden is pictured with her family, husband Mike Hadden and their sons, from left, Noah and Jaxon during their first Christmas with Jaxon. PHOTO PROVIDED