



'Loser' shares her story

She discusses losing weight and her walk with God in the book "Fat Chance."



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Julie Hadden is a big loser. And I say that in a good way. If you're a fan of NBC's successful reality show "The Biggest Loser," you may remember Hadden from season four.

She was first runner-up for that season, coming within 8 pounds of the winner. But that doesn't diminish her accomplishment: The Jacksonville mother lost nearly 100 pounds, which translated to 45 percent of her body weight.

Her story is so much more than weight loss, though. For Hadden, the experience turned into a spiritual journey. In the end, she got healthy physically and emotionally, and strengthened her Christian walk with God.

She tells that tale in "Fat Chance: Losing the Weight, Gaining My Worth" (GuidepostsBooks, \$22). Readers will be treated to her wit, honesty,

advice, tips, an exercise regime and even favorite low-calorie recipes.

"Believe me, I never wanted to be the poster child for obesity," she says in a telephone interview. "I would have preferred Miss America. But after I started gaining weight, it just piled on. I tried and failed to lose it so many times."

Getting on the show was just a fluke. She read about the open casting call in her hometown in summer 2006. Married and a stay-at-home mother of one son, she figured: What do I have to lose?

At 5-foot-2 and more than 200 pounds, plenty.

"I was the fat, funny girl in the room. On the surface, I didn't make a big deal about it. Underneath it all, I was dying inside," she says.

She was also in conflict with her Christian faith.

The Bible tells believers they should treat their bodies like a temple. Instead, Hadden says, "I was acting like it was a fair-ground."

As the numbers on the scale went up, her depression deepened. She felt God was mad and punishing her. What she learned

through her weight-loss process was that "God wanted me to be the Julie that he created, not the one I created."

When she went to the first audition, she went without expectations. With 250,000 people competing for 18 slots, making the final cut was a shock. And so was the commitment it came with: Hadden had to move to a secret location in California for four months.

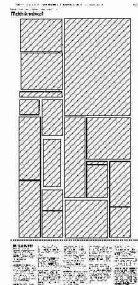
She had her husband Mike's blessings. He and extended family members helped with child care for her son in her absence. Being apart from her family and facing the demons that had plagued her so long made the experience a challenge.

"Doing 'The Biggest Loser' should be a last resort for anyone. It's like prison. There's nothing fun about it," she says. "In the end, it was an incredible experience. But when I was in the middle of it, I didn't always feel so good about it."

But surprising things happened along the way. Her faith in herself and in God took a giant leap. She developed a kinship with the show's tough trainer, Jillian Michaels, who wrote the forward for "Fat Chance." And she developed a liking — not quite love — for exercise, something she avoided for years.

When describing herself six years ago, Hadden paints a not-so-pretty picture.

"Insecure, embarrassed to be seen in public, uncomfortable in my own skin, a lot of self-doubt," she says.



And today? "Strong and powerful. There's nothing I can't do now," she says. "I finally value myself. And what you value, you treat a lot better."

Those 8 pounds that kept her from the title proved to be serendipitous. Three weeks after the show ended, Hadden and her husband got surprising news: A baby was available for adoption. Because she was unable to conceive a second child, the couple had gone through the pre-adoption process in hopes of adding to their family.

The baby weighed 8 pounds.

Hadden never aspired to be a writer. But once she returned home, people stopped her wherever she went, to ask advice or to share some of their own stories. Finally, her husband, a public relations director, told her to write a book "so I wouldn't have to keep repeating myself."

Eight of 10 publishers responded to the manuscript. GuildPostBooks ended up buying it at auction.

Next week, Tampa hosts a casting call for the upcoming season of "The

Biggest Loser." For those who aspire to be the next Julie Hadden, she didn't do this alone.

"What I found out is that there are a lot of people who are just like me — the way I used to be," she says. "And if I could do this, they can do it, too. But without God, it would not have been possible."

Reporter Michelle Bearden can be reached at (813) 259-7613.

'THE BIGGEST LOSER'

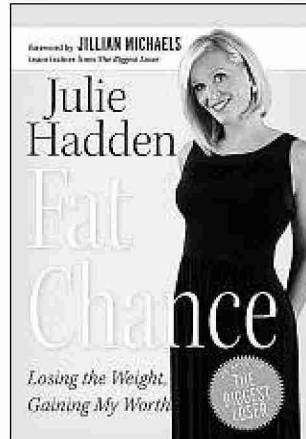
OPEN CASTING CALL

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., March 6

WHERE: Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, 5223 N. Orient Road, Tampa

REQUIREMENTS: Must be at least 100 pounds overweight. Bring a non-returnable photo. Don't line up more than three hours before open call start time.

INFORMATION: www.thebiggestlosercasting.com. The Web site also provides information on how to submit an application and video if you can't make the open casting call.



"Fat Chance" will offer advice, tips, an exercise regime and even low-calorie recipes.



Julie Hadden was 5-foot-2 and more than 200 pounds before she went on "The Biggest Loser."

Hadden family photo



NBC

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Hadden family photo

Julie Hadden with husband Mike and sons Noah, left, and Jaxon. The family adopted Jaxon after Julie finished as the runner-up on season four of “The Biggest Loser.”



NBC

Hadden lost nearly 100 pounds, or 45 percent of her body weight, on the reality TV show.