

If You're On the Wrong Bus, Get Off!

Rabah Chettfour's Vegan Story

I've always told my children, "If you find yourself on the wrong bus, get off! When you first get on, you may not realize it is the wrong bus. But as soon as you realize it, get off right away. The longer you wait to get off, the harder it will be to get to where you want to go."

We jumped into the 3 week challenge as a family.

I finally found the right bus 4 1/2 months ago, and on March 8, 2010, my wife and I and all four of our children got on it. That's when we stopped eating animal products and adopted a healthy, plant-based diet.

I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes 20 years ago. I tried controlling it with diet for the first 8 or 10 years, but then had to get on medications. I hated taking the medications, and I also hated the restrictiveness of the diet. But most of all, I hated being tired all the time. By 4 or 5 p.m. I was too tired to even consider going out for a walk with my wife, Jeanette.

We were invited by some friends to attend a Food for Life cooking class with them last November. We went as their guest to just one session, but after class we purchased some of the books sold there. One of them was Dr.

Neal Barnard's Program for Reversing Diabetes, which describes how a low-fat, plant-based diet actually reverses diabetes. Jeanette read it before I did and thought it sounded too good to be true, but thought we should at least give it a try. Dr. Barnard suggested trying it for just 3 weeks. We thought

we could certainly do that, so we talked with our four teen-agers and explained why we wanted to do this. They agreed, so we jumped into the 3 week challenge as a family. This was on March 8.

After 48 hours, we knew we were on the right bus and had no intention of getting off! I immediately noticed a huge increase in my energy. My blood sugars dropped and I was able to finally eat some foods I love but had had to give up, such as cous cous, corn on the cob, rice, and fruit. I've gone from feeling restricted in my diet to feeling free and contented.

As a family, we have collectively lost 135 pounds in 4 1/2 months. Even Jeanette, who has always been a runner, has been able to lose 20 pounds that she hadn't lost even while running regularly. Our teen-age kids have been thrilled not only with their weight loss, but also with

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their acne clearing up. For me, losing 20 pounds has been an important part of reversing my diabetes.

Jeanette has also noticed a real change in her skin. She has her hands in chlorine a lot, and she used to slather lotion on every day and they would still be dry. Now, her skin is so much better that she rarely even uses the lotion.

I know I will never go back to my meat-centered diet. There are 3 reasons for this:

- First, I am content with my food. I have a great variety of foods I truly enjoy.
- Second, I have so much more energy; I feel like I did when I was 20 years old.
- Third, I have achieved tangible results in terms of weight loss and drop in my blood sugar.

I grew up in Algeria, eating mostly vegetarian food -- not really by choice. We just couldn't afford much meat. If we ate a chicken (about the size of a cornish game hen) it would feed twelve people! When I

left Algeria, I began working in restaurants and hotels, including a cruise ship, and now, Jeanette and I own Aladdin's Restaurant in Anchorage. Over the last 35 years, I've had the "best" meat there is and I don't miss it one bit!

Jeanette experimented with recipes and learned how to make vegan versions of some of our favorite

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Mediterranean foods, which has helped our kids adapt to a plant-based diet. And we've added quite a few vegan items to our restaurant menu, including five soups and half a dozen entrées.

Now, when we finish a long night working in the restaurant, I have enough energy to take a long walk with Jeanette. Four months ago, I couldn't even have imagined being able to walk 6 or 7 miles on a beautiful Alaskan night at midnight. My life, and my whole family's life, has been transformed. Truly, I've found myself again.