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A 188-pound weight lifted

After years of stressing over his size, Chicago attorney turns life around — on national TV

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Thirty minutes before he was due in court at the Daley Center, Raheel Saleem was rushing around the office when the seam of his pants ripped open.

It would be a nightmare for any lawyer to deal with before a court appearance. But for Saleem, an insecure young attorney still working on gaining confidence in his career, it was a reminder of an issue he was avoiding.

"That was kind of my moment when I realized I had to do something about my weight," Saleem said.

In the year since that 2013 seam-splitting incident, Saleem, 29, has been on a whirlwind personal journey that included quitting his job at Pyes & Cherin LLP, becoming a finalist in a reality TV show competition and losing 188 pounds — more than half his body weight.

The experience transformed him physically and mentally.

"I think the show, if anything, uncovered a lot of things about me," he said. "The fact that I am a hard worker, a fighter, gritty and the fact that I'm willing to work hard to be successful."

A little help from friends

A month or two after signing up for a gym membership, Saleem, who is better known as "Bobby" to his friends and family, received a mass e-mail from the gym that said NBC was holding a local open casting call for the 15th season of "The Biggest Loser."

The reality show brings together obese contestants in a competition where they diet, learn about nutrition and do



Before: Raheel "Bobby" Saleem at the start of Season 15 of "The Biggest Loser." Paul Drinkwater/NBC

intense workouts to see who can lose the most weight. Contestants are voted off the show or eliminated based on their progress each week and other variables.

The e-mail felt like a sign, Saleem said, but he was hesitant. His close friend —

"There are going to be challenges in your way. There are going to be difficulties along the way, but you get through them the best you can and, once you do, you get confidence from that."

Cassiday, Schade LLP associate Myriah F. Conaughty — told him to go for it.

Conaughty, a fellow 2011 John Marshall Law School graduate, said Saleem has always been

self-conscious about his weight.

Though he's a hard worker and very intelligent, she said, he didn't believe in himself and constantly worried that others would judge him as lazy or sloppy because of his appearance.

The mentality spilled over into

Saleem's personal life, as well. Social activities were limited to what he felt comfortable with and he was usually reluctant to have drinks or eat dinner with groups.



After: Saleem modeling at the Legal Fashion Show hosted by The Chicago Bar Association on March 27. Chandler West

When she and other friends would try to get Saleem to go out on his birthday each November, he rarely felt like celebrating.

"He would say 'I'm too fat to live,'" Conaughty said.

The day of the "Biggest Loser" casting call, Saleem wavered over whether he should show up. Conaughty convinced him to go, and she stood in line with him at the audition.

After more than a month of casting interviews, Saleem officially became one of 15 contestants on the show.

Weighing in at 358 pounds, Saleem went to the "Biggest Loser" ranch in California in late June. The four months he spent there, he said, seem like a dream — a "nutty" and "surreal" experience.

"It literally was my full-time job, working out and dieting and eating well," Saleem said. "It's a lot of working out."

Amidst training sessions and meetings, TV viewers got a glimpse into the contestants' lives and the personal issues that affected their weight.

Food addiction is often attached to an underlying issue, Saleem said, so no matter how many times he had gone on diets and lost weight, it always came back.

"For me it was more of a soul-searching expedition than anything else," he said. "Once that issue is resolved, you can work toward that healthier lifestyle."

Saleem had been overweight his entire life.

A first-generation son of immigrants from Pakistan and the Philippines, his parents' hopes and dreams became his. The anxiety that came with the pressure to succeed led him to turn to food to cope.

That addiction, combined with constant studying in law school and being in a profession based around sitting at a desk, led to a sedentary lifestyle.

At one point, Saleem said, he was in danger of passing the 400-pound mark.

That wasn't his only personal struggle. Though Saleem's friends knew he was gay, he had not come out to his parents, which over time only added to his anxiety.

Bob Harper, one of the celebrity trainers on the show, helped him work through that stress — stating for the first time publicly that he too is gay. Saleem later revealed his sexual orientation to his parents, who have both been supportive of him.

In multiple ways, Harper helped Saleem embrace his accomplishments and be proud of himself, he said.

"Every workout was a struggle, every workout was a challenge — but it kind of was synonymous to life," Saleem said. "There are going to be challenges in your way. There are going to be difficulties along the

Make a weight-loss plan of attack

Since his appearance on "The Biggest Loser," Raheel Saleem has met many attorneys who tell him their biggest obstacle to losing weight is time.

He offers the following tips and thoughts on diet and exercise.

Plan and prepare

Calories from fast-food restaurants and ordering takeout for late nights in the office add up quickly.

Preparing meals in advance and bringing lunch to work makes it easier to create controlled food portions.

Saleem cooks protein and vegetables in bulk so that over the course of a week he can

measure out portions and have meals ready to go quickly.

And if it comes down to takeout, Saleem advises picking a healthy option like a salad.

"It's very important to have the diet down — because at the end of the day, you can only work out so much, but you can't really eat a bad diet," Saleem said.

Commit to exercise and fun

Finding time is difficult, Saleem said, but commit to less than an hour a day and do it in a way that works with your schedule.

"Just 45 (minutes). And even if a schedule is difficult, to get to a place, take the stairs or

take the long route to the Daley Center," he said. "Make different steps that collectively or cumulatively will amount to something."

Exercise should be fun, he said, and the best workouts are the ones where you don't feel like you're working out. He suggests finding enjoyable activities and getting friends involved, too. Saleem is now staying in shape through spin classes and tennis.

"I'm not on a treadmill, I'm not on an elliptical," he said. "Seldom will you see me on those machines. It's finding what you love to do and doing that almost on a daily basis."

— Jamie Loo

way, but you get through them the best you can and, once you do, you get confidence from that.

"(Harper's) workouts definitely helped set the building blocks for my confidence."

The comeback

Saleem was eliminated from the show during the ninth week of competition. He had a chance to return, though, if he could lose more weight while at home than the other eliminated contestants.

He won that challenge, went back to the show and finished in third place.

On the Feb. 4 season finale, Saleem came on stage, arms wide open, beaming. He had gone from 358 to 170 pounds.

"When he walked out on the finale stage, it brought me to tears," said Conaughty, who was in the studio audience in Los Angeles for the finale. "The glow and radiance on his face says everything. That's something you can only get from the inside out."

Two months later, Saleem is still glowing.

He is maintaining his diet and does indoor cycling daily. Saleem also maintains a presence on social media, interacting with his fans and posting inspirational messages.

To see a clip of Saleem showing his before-and-after transformation at "The Biggest Loser" Season 15 finale, go to nbc.com/the-biggest-loser/contestants/season-15/bobby-saleem.

"I feel I have a sense of responsibility," he said. "Not only to maintain my health because I was fortunate enough to get that opportunity but also to pay it forward and make sure I still educate other people that may have been in my position or are in my position prior to the show."

Saleem is now working with run-walk programs and resorts associated with "The Biggest Loser." He is also signing up for 3.1-mile races, including some focused on fundraising and awareness for disease prevention and research. He is playing in a tennis tournament in June and will participate in the two-day, 200-mile Ride for AIDS in July.

For someone who recalls a time when her friend wouldn't walk more than a block to meet her for coffee, Conaughty said "the fact that he wants to run-walk anything is crazy."

Saleem is now confident,

carefree, outgoing and adventurous, she said. The old Saleem would shy away from social outings but now embraces meeting new people.

He always declined invitations to Cubs games, the movies or rowing on Lake Michigan, but now he wants to do all of them. He's even convinced Conaughty to go to a spinning class with him.

"What he has been through, that has to be harder than going into any fight we face in the courtroom," she said.

Saleem is currently looking for a new job either in the law or in-house at a nonprofit. Prior to the show, he concentrated on commercial transactions, litigation, civil rights, probate, compliance and regulatory law.

Being a "Biggest Loser" gave him self-confidence and perspective on both his personal identity and what he wants to do with his legal career.

"There's no way I can describe how excited I am about my future, because that sort of clarity gives you focus and motivation," he said. "I'm willing to work hard to try and obtain what I want out of my life — and that includes my profession."