

# Village on a Diet

*How the folks of Taylor, B.C., decided to embrace a healthier lifestyle...right now.*

BY JENNIFER POWER SCOTT



In the darkness of the night, when the last thing she wanted was to be alone, Jamie Kinzett survived the solitude the only way she knew how: by hitting the kitchen. She would cook up a pot of mac and cheese, or layer gooey butter through popcorn and coat the top with flavoured sprinkles. Then came the cheese, the handfuls of fish-shaped crackers, the potato chips and anything else she could find in her cupboards. It was a flood of food to feed a sad soul.

"I didn't want to spend time alone," says Jamie, a 27-year-old mother who moved to the tiny community of Taylor, B.C., just over two years ago. "I didn't like myself a whole lot, so I would just binge. And then I would go to bed, and I would feel sick. It got to the point where I'd feel like puking in the middle of the night."

With a loving fiancé, George, and a toddler named Kayla, Jamie had her share of joy. But when her weight reached more than 250 pounds, obesity was her prison. She postponed her wedding because she didn't like the way she looked in a size 20 gown. And she lived like a hermit, staying in her house with her daughter, the TV and the computer. "I had just kind of accepted that I was going to be obese for the rest of my life," she says.

But by fate or by fluke, a very 21st-century kind of salvation was about to sweep into town. Force Four Entertainment, a Vancouver television production company, was searching the country for a community to feature in a new, big-budget CBC documentary series called "Village on a Diet." The show's goal: To help a town shed weight, get into shape and pump up its passion for healthy living.

At first, some locals weren't so sure they wanted the rest of the country getting the skinny on their weight woes. "We're trying to do



The town's residents fully commit themselves to pushing, riding and stretching their way to better health.

what's right," says Glen Cross, the superintendent of the local golf course. "We don't want to come off as the silly hicks from northeast B.C. who don't know any better than to not eat the triple cheeseburger. [The producers] came up, and they were very reassuring that that's not what this show was about."

In the end, Force Four Entertainment picked Taylor, a community of around 1,400 people at Mile 36 on the Alaska Highway 97. Not just because of the picturesque Peace River, the walking trail and the serene green hills. Not just because the people of Taylor have a predilection for pepperoni pizza and 60 per cent of the population is overweight or obese. And not just because there's a 24-hour McDonald's nearby but no grocery store.

Taylor stood out because so many people there wanted to get healthy, and they were ready to work hard for it, even if it meant baring their souls – and a few of their bad habits – to the nation. "I really needed help," Jamie says. "So if I had to be on TV to get the help, I was going to do it."

The series, which CBC Television will air coast-to-coast in 10 one-hour episodes (plus a followup 11th episode) starting Jan. 3, gets

grippingly personal with about a dozen Taylor residents. It is storytelling that goes way beyond the numbers on bathroom scales and the inches around bellies. "Village on a Diet" probes the pain behind the weight gain. "[There are] some really amazing people that pull on your heart strings," says John Ritchie, one of the show's executive producers. "Jamie was the person whom we first kind of fell in love with and we thought the whole country would do the same. She just desperately wanted to change the way she lived her life."

Last spring, Force Four Entertainment deployed an army of 30 producers, directors and staff to Taylor on a three-month mission to battle the bulge – and make TV good enough to inspire a nation. To whip the community's collective derriere into shape, the company also flew in a dream team made up of a physician, a psychologist, two personal trainers, a dietitian and a world-class chef. With cameras in their faces and experts at their disposal, the people of Taylor were fierce and ready.

Once Jonathan Arsenault got over the shock that a big TV show was coming to his town, he had a feeling it was going to save his life. The 15-year-old had been bullied because of his weight since the first grade. In Grade 8, things were so bad his



parents decided to homeschool him for a few months. "I was always called fat," says Jonathan, a gentle boy who likes helping students with disabilities. "I was really big and all these kids at school were just superthin, and they made fun of the kids that were the biggest. Of course, I was the biggest."

Jonathan's father, Steve, spent years as king of the one-handed meal. A tough-guy trucker who sometimes works seven days a week, he liked to lunch at the wheel of his big blue rig, eating McDonald's burgers and deep-fried ribs from a local greasy spoon. On long hauls, sugar-loaded coffee and sinful snacks were his fuel. "I'd grab big bags of tacos, pepperoni, you name it," says Steve, who is five foot eight and whose weight peaked at 240 pounds. "I was borderline diabetic, [had] high blood pressure and all the goodies."

Father and son decided to be a part of "Village on a Diet" together. They were there from the beginning, when the townspeople stood on a gigantic truck scale. "OK, Taylor, are we ready to find out how much we weigh?"

bellowed Glen Cross, the "town crier" for the show. Everyone watched as the number on the scale topped out at more than 28,000 pounds. "Are we happy about that? No! And are we gonna do something about that? Yeah! Follow me, and let's get started!"

But as everyone in Taylor came to see, fighting obesity can mean a lot of pain – and a few tears. In one scene, a woman whose family members struggle with their weight is overcome with emotion and pats her eyes with a tissue. Dr. Ali Zentner, a specialist in internal medicine and obesity (she'll also be a regular contributor to CBC News throughout the "Live Right Now" campaign, sharing her medical expertise with CBC on TV and radio, and online, starting Jan. 3), delivers the perfect premetamorphosis pep talk. "You're going to do what every girl does," said Zentner, who has »

## EAT WELL NOW

If anyone has a passion for healthy, beautiful food, it's Jonathan Chovancek. As chef de cuisine with Culinary Capers Catering in Vancouver, he spends his days creating spectacular dishes fit for kings. Chovancek took time away from the big city to help the people of Taylor, B.C., learn how to make delicious, nutritious meals – and lose weight in the process. Here are a few of his best tips for making mealtime a healthy adventure.

**1. Forget takeout food.** Instead, take control of the amount of salt and fat in your diet by cooking from scratch at home.

**2. Eliminate white and processed foods.** Cook brown and red rice, and discover the beauty of quinoa, a little-known grain that's supercharged with nutrients. Ditch the margarine. Use vegetable fats such as olive oil for cooking and organic unsalted butter for baking.

**3. Get sweet on fruit, not candy.** Apples, pears, pineapples, mangoes, peaches and nectarines are incredibly sweet when eaten at their peak. Fresh fruit is a great dessert.

**4. Be creative.** Each week, buy one spice, herb, fruit or vegetable you have never tried. You can search the Internet for tips on preparation.

**5. Cook together.** Cooking is about sharing, and you'll be amazed how much better your food tastes when you enjoy it with the ones you love.



herself lost 160 pounds in the last 10 years. “You’re going to have a good cry. And then you’re going to get pissed off. And then you’re going to get ‘er done.”

But “getting ‘er done” takes more than garden salads, jumping jacks and willpower. It also takes a little retraining of the brain. Adele Fox, a Calgary-based psychologist who specializes in obesity, helped people in Taylor recognize when their emotions, not their bodies, were pushing them toward the chips and chocolate. “When you reach for food,” Fox explains, “ask yourself if you’re mind-hungry or body-hungry. Do you want the food because you’re bored, happy, the food smells good, someone’s pressuring you to eat it? Or are you body-hungry? People that have weight issues usually eat from a place of mind-hunger.”



#### FIND MORE ONLINE

Learn more about “Village on a Diet” and get inspired to Live Right Now at [canadianliving.com/february](http://canadianliving.com/february).

This page: The residents of Taylor, B.C., weigh in, ready to tackle the scale and their unhealthy habits. Opposite page (clockwise from top left): Men, women and children engage in one of the show’s grueling yet fun physical challenges; Jonathan Arsenault enjoys a healthy snack; Jamie Kinzett feels empowered as she reaches the end of a long climb.

While the residents were dealing with their emotions and self-image, they were also lacing up their sneakers and working up buckets of sweat. The weekly fitness challenges were no walk in the park. Jamie, the Arsenault men and everyone else huffed, puffed, groaned and grunted their way through grueling tests of stamina and strength. There were tugs-of-war, hill climbs, sit-ups, pushups, bike rides – anything the trainers could throw at them. “Come on, let’s go!” trainer Mike Veinot would holler. “It’s not time for a break!”

Instead of craving burgers and ribs, the people of Taylor soon had an appetite for fitness. And it had nothing to do with a cash prize – because there wasn’t one. “The prize is that you have a new lease on life,” says Garfield Wilson, a Vancouver-based trainer. “What we’re trying to do is show people a different way, a different lifestyle, something that will make them feel good in the end.”

While Veinot and Wilson worked the bodies of Taylor, Jonathan Chovancek made healthy magic in the kitchens. The Vancouver chef, whose creations have dazzled discriminating palates in award-winning restaurants across Canada, showed up at houses

toting olive oil and bags of carrots, beets, leeks, onions, radishes and other fresh foods. He countered Taylor’s “fast-food culture” by teaching people to cook, giving them recipes for everything from kamut pancakes to roasted cauliflower with curry. “If you believe in me and believe in what I do,” says Chovancek, “I can show you a way to make a positive change in your life. That was my approach.”

A year ago, 50-year-old grandfather Rob Fraser was in the hospital, vomiting all night and wincing through the murderous pain of his second gallbladder attack. He was a hard-bodied, medal-winning athlete as a teenager, but years of rich dinners, prime rib and bacon had caught up with him. He weighed 340 pounds, and his belly was so big he could rest a cup of coffee on it. Lying in the hospital bed, he made a decision. “Holy mackerel, Rob,” he said to himself. “You need to do something about the weight.”

And if anyone on “Village on a Diet” has a look of seething, single-minded determination in his eyes, it’s



Jamie Kinzett can see a big hill from her house. She always thought it was “just a hill.” But when the trainers told the townspeople their challenge was to climb it, the hill was suddenly steep and intimidating. “You’ve got to climb that mountain to get to the next level,” said Garfield Wilson, holding a starter’s pistol.

Jamie started up the hill. Before long, the height started to terrify her. Her legs were hurting; her heart was pounding. She felt like she couldn’t breathe. Steve and Jonathan Arsenault had made it to the top, but they came back to walk with her. A woman Jamie had just met started calling, “You can do it!” And Garfield Wilson hurried over to help. “We’re with you the whole way, Jamie,” he said.

Kinzett stopped and started, and stopped and started again. She bent over to catch her breath. She grimaced in pain. But in the end, she made it across the finish line and hugged her fiancé, George. The crowd roared. “Everybody was at the end clapping and cheering for me,” she says. “It was just such an empowering moment. I get goose bumps thinking about it.”

And in that moment, standing at the top of the steep hill in Taylor, the young woman who used to stay home and eat out of desperation had a new light in her eyes. It was something that looked a whole lot like hope. ■

Rob Fraser. By the time the series started shooting in the spring, he had already lost more than 40 pounds on his own. Even though the fitness challenges left him feeling a “new dimension of pain,” the former judo star kept fighting to get his obesity in a stranglehold. “The first and foremost reason I did this was for the family, particularly my grandkids,” he says. “They don’t have a hope in hell of not being big if we don’t change as adults.”

After three months of pushups, soul-searching and talking to TV cameras, great things had happened for Rob and many other people in Taylor. And they all agree: If sharing their pains and triumphs helps other Canadians, millions of whom struggle with weight, it was worth every drop of sweat.

## THE RIGHT MINDSET

Anyone can go on a diet and lose weight. But for a lot of people, the pounds come right back. The key, says Calgary psychologist Adele Fox, is learning how to maintain weight loss. And that means looking not only at your body, but at your brain, too. Here are a few of Fox’s tips for losing weight – and keeping it off.

- 1. Develop a good knowledge base.** Take time to learn about fat, calories, exercise and healthy food.
- 2. Figure out how you’re using food.** “For example, do you eat when you’re bored?” says Fox. “Do you eat when you’re happy? Do you eat when you’re feeling lonely? You have to separate feelings from food.”
- 3. Don’t fear food.** If you cut out all treats, you can wind up going back to your old eating habits and sabotaging your weight loss. “Cut yourself some slack,” Fox says. “If you love chocolate or popcorn with a bit of butter, use it in a healthy way. Portion the popcorn out as opposed to plunking yourself in front of the TV and slathering the butter on.”
- 4. Eat slowly, taking at least 20 minutes to enjoy your meal.** “Put your utensils down between bites a few times or throughout the meal.” Taking sips of water between bites can help too.
- 5. Love your body – even before you lose the weight.** Own your sexiness, self-esteem and confidence. “The sexy size of jeans,” says Fox, “is the size you’re at right now.”