



# REALITY TV

## Changes Life of Biggest Loser

by **Ronda Einbinder**

It was February 2006 when Erik Chopin's brother phoned to tell him about an open casting call in Manhattan for the highly rated series *Biggest Loser*, which was beginning its third season. Although Erik had already scheduled LAP-BAND surgery to shed some of the 407 pounds playing havoc on his 6'2" frame, he decided to take a day off work and spend six hours in line on a cold New York day for that slight chance that the casting agents would choose him for their show. To Erik's surprise, he was asked to step aside for a follow-up interview on camera, and he ultimately would become a finalist in Los Angeles and the *Biggest Loser* on national television.

Erik Chopin was a chubby kid, growing up in New York City. He remembers his mother purchasing husky pants throughout his youth. "My parents were aware that I was overweight, so there was constant policing of what I ate," Erik recalled. "I remember finishing my dinner and then going to the cupboard for a snack and my parents would tell me, 'No, you just ate, that is enough.' There was something about not being allowed to eat when I was feeling hungry that made me eat more."

With his interest in girls becoming more important in his life than food, Erik slimmed down in his twenties to catch a special lady. "I was a bartender and my [future] wife, Michele, was a cashier. I was getting myself in shape and would run in the morning and night."

His exercise plan worked, and the two began to date. "We dated awhile and I stayed thin, but during the engagement period I progressively started gaining weight," Erik said. "I weighed 225 pounds when we met and was up to 320 during the engagement. We moved in together during that time and I bought all the bad food my parents would never allow. I had my freedom now and I could do what I wanted. There was no one to stop me."

In 1995, when they were both 25, Michele and Erik wed. Erik decided he wanted to look good for the wedding and began a diet and exercise program six months before the wedding that brought his weight down to 245 pounds. Erik also enrolled at Hofstra University and received a degree in accounting. He began working in the corporate world, but then realized his dream was to own a delicatessen. "I called the deli Emma's Deli, named after my eldest daughter, who is now six. We owned the deli for three years, but recently sold it due to the travel and absenteeism with my work speaking in various cities."

Erik was at his lowest point when the scale reached 400 pounds. "My wife was picking up signals that I was very depressed," said Erik. "I would stay in bed and my wife would say, 'Don't you need to go to the deli?' I was withdrawn, and it was because of the weight. I felt awful and had no energy or self-esteem. I did not want to meet new people, and I did not want to see people I had not seen in a while. I even stayed away from meeting the teachers at my kids' school."

It was then that Michele suggested Erik speak to his doctor, who suggested the LAP-BAND surgery. "I did my research online, and I felt that procedure would work for me," he said. "I signed up for surgery and did all the pre-surgical testing and a date was on the calendar. It was then that I got the call from my brother about the open casting call."

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Erik found himself getting callback after callback and was frustrating his surgeon by continuously postponing the surgery. "After the fourth callback, I told the doctor to cancel, but I never let on to him why I was canceling," Erik explained. "I was almost embarrassed to say I was auditioning for a TV show. I became a finalist and was sent out to LA, but they still did one more elimination before making the final cut. When I made the cut in LA, I had to stay there and start the show right away. I was moved onto a ranch in Simi Valley and remained there for four months."

Erik was told to give up all communication with his family; packages from his kids or talks on the phone would be used as incentives on the show. "The first time I saw my wife was on the cruise episode after two months, and I had lost 45 pounds. It was very emotional," he said.

After four months of following coach Bob's direction, Erik was crowned the Biggest Loser, walking away from the show weighing 124 pounds less.

A few days before the finale, Erik made an appointment with Board Certified Plastic Surgeon Andre Aboolian, planning to receive a tummy tuck. "Dr. Aboolian said that no matter how many stomach crunches I would do, no amount would help the skin, since it was stretched so far," he said. "He said a tummy tuck would look irregular because I would have a flat front area and the skin on the side would be pushed out."

Dr. Aboolian and Erik decided a full body lift would circle around the body and tighten his back and sides. Erik underwent the procedure in March 2007. "I feel great. My biggest fear was the six-week recovery when you can't exercise, since I thought I would fall into bad habits," Erik said.

Another concern Erik and other patients have is losing more weight and ending up with sagging skin.

"I tell my patients not to worry, because if they look like they can lose more weight, then we will wait until they have lost all the possible weight they can and then perform the body lift. Erik was a perfect candidate for the procedure," said Dr. Aboolian.

Today, Erik is continuing a scaled-down version of what Bob taught him on the show. "The show was very extreme and a lot of times unrealistic for someone who is at home and is working and has a family," Erik said. "There were no distractions on the show."

Erik has gone from deli owner to nationwide speaker and says he will never return to his old habits. He may have had 15 minutes of fame, but he has a lifetime of health ahead of him. ❖



## Plastic Surgeon Andre Aboolian...



...is a leader in body contouring surgery. Having appeared on ABC's *Extreme Makeovers* as well as *The Biggest Loser*, he's also becoming a familiar face for many TV viewers. Dr. Aboolian advises the following for those considering plastic surgery after weight loss:

- The patient should be near his or her weight goal prior to plastic surgery. It would be best if the patient is at a realistic weight and has stable exercise and diet habits.
- The patient can exercise as early as four weeks after plastic surgery; physical activity will increase the body temperature, blood pressure and heart rate after a body lift procedure.
- The patient should maintain a slight bend in the hips and knees while sleeping and walking to minimize tension in the incision lines.
- The patient can do multiple plastic surgery procedures at one time, depending on the amount of time in the operating room. Often the surgeon recommends spreading out the procedures by at least 10 days.

Dr. Aboolian will not consider a patient for plastic surgery until a minimum of one year after weight loss surgery. Follow instructions after surgery! Dr. Aboolian has very few post-operative incidents when a patient rests and recovers appropriately. The patient will need to see the surgeon consistently for checkups, and it is important that a special tape be placed over the incision lines for a few months after surgery.