

Here's an insider's look at those weight-loss resolutions

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January 1's arrival often is accompanied by steadfast New Year's resolutions.

Among the top five again this year will be losing weight.

Chef Michael Gomez of Smith River is seizing on the year 2020 to zero in healthy eating. "Like 20/20 vision, I want people to focus this year on what is really important for a healthier lifestyle," Gomez said.

He said he's worked in restaurants all his life, over the years feeding celebrities such as John Travolta, Steve McQueen, James Gardner and Ronald Reagan.

That is, until he made a career change. "I went from the stars to the bars," said Gomez.

He subsequently worked as a chef in the prison system for 28 years. On March 5, 1990, Gomez became one of the original employees when Pelican Bay State Prison opened north of Crescent City.

“Pelican Bay was the first prison in the state to hire a nutritionist. So, I was around food 24/7,” Gomez said.

And being around food had its downside. At one point, Gomez weighed 350 pounds, thanks to a genetic propensity toward obesity. His brother tried to address his extreme weight by having gastric bypass surgery, Gomez said, only to die seven days later from medical complications.

He said gastric bypass surgery and its reduced-diet requirements remains the No. 1 extreme weight-loss strategy, with a 75% success rate. Number 2 is Weight Watchers, followed by Jenny Craig and Keto.

Regardless of which diet individuals try, said Gomez, he suggests three steps: eat only when you’re hungry, eat a balanced diet, and stop when you feel full.

Following those simple guidelines, Gomez said he lost 150 pounds ... and has kept it off for 20 years.

After retiring from Pelican Bay in 2017, he has brought his knowledge to young people, teaching kids how to cook through school district education programs. “The district allowed me to let them cook in the school, then in their home,” he said.

Through his youth cooking classes, Gomez began working with Sonny Baker, the SNAP Education program coordinator for the Del Norte County Department of Health and Human Services.

Her healthy-living programs, such as Food Smart, are taught by community members like Gomez, people she calls champions of change.

Baker said her programs are part of CalFresh Healthy Living, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with additional state and county financing.

They’re based on American Dietary Guidelines promoting an overall healthy lifestyle, nutrition and physical activity.

“One of the local initiatives we’re working with in the community is Champions for Change, (people) who demonstrate that healthy change is possible through their lifestyle changes, who overcome obstacles and struggles, using their stories and testimonies,” Baker said.

“We give people encouragement, motivation and inspiration that lead into changes.”

She said one of the program’s newest workshops is Food Smart, which tailors healthy tips and dietary guidelines to those who attend. The workshops are taught by 10 “champions” from the community - including Gomez.

“The overall guidelines show anyone can practice lifestyle changes with built-in habits, such as reading labels, using recipes and networking with other community members’ resources.

“It’s about creating a community... Creating a healthy individual, creating a safe space to learn that addresses their needs and struggles. It helps them make the journey to good health because they are empowered.”

Other champions for change involved in the county's workshops include Alexander Dairy, Rumiano Cheese Co. and the Open Door Community Health Center.

"There are other people like us who are what we call 'healthy nuts.' My goal is to be a healthy town," Gomez said.

He added that while Baker teaches knowledge, he teaches habits.

One habit he'd like to see, especially in youth, is to give up soda pop.

"What happens when you drink soda? Soda has 6 tablespoons of sugar in it. Every tablespoon of sugar kills 14,000 white blood cells.

"When does the flu season start? October. That's when we eat a lot of sugar," he said.

"What I'm teaching is not how to lose weight. The five leading diseases don't start with obesity. It's heart disease. Then colon and prostate and breast cancer. Then misdiagnoses. Diabetes and then obesity."

He said the greatest roadblock to weight loss is hormonal imbalance. So, he tailors his diets to the individual's needs.

"What I teach, in general, is wellness. And once they understand the wellness of their bodies, then I teach hunger patterns."

Armed with his knowledge of food, Gomez provides specific healthy-living guidelines for whichever diet someone is on, be it Keto, gastric bypass surgery, Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig or others.

Gomez breaks down his healthy lifestyle guidelines to six key points:

1 - Eat only when you're hungry. You don't need to eat three square meals a day to sustain a healthy lifestyle or weight-loss program.

2 - Watch your portion size. Your stomach is a "fuel tank," not a "storage tank." Eat what gets burned up by daily activity, not in quantities that require long-term storage.

3 - Hang out with family and friends who also like to be healthy.

4 - Make time for some exercise. A healthy lifestyle is diet and exercise. Consider the benefits of low-impact water aerobics or swimming.

5 - Keep an eye out for club or community programs that can help your lifestyle change, such as Del Norte County's Food Smarts.

6 - Make time for yourself. Don't get stuck in a rut at work or home. Let go of the daily grind and give more time for yourself.

"The best way to help yourself to look good on the outside is focusing on how you feel on the inside," he said. "Focus on helping yourself by saying, 'I care about what it takes to help myself.'"

For more healthy lifestyle tips from Chef Michael Gomez, go to lovemydiet.org. Find a calendar of county workshops and classes online at <https://delnortecalfresh.org>.