

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

JEBBA HANDLEY



MERRILY LUNSFORD/
CAPE COD TIMES
**Jebba Handley
of Orleans
lost 50
pounds in a
year through
TOPS, Taking
Off Pounds
Sensibly, and
hopes to lose
50 more. One
of her favor-
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Roma toma-
toes.**

A life of
abundance
tempered by
an appetite of
moderation.

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

Food has always been close to Jebba Handley's heart. She loves to cook, she loves to eat, she loves to feed the people she loves. "There's nothing I love better than having people sit at my table and talk," she says. "That's high entertainment to me."

For six and half years, many of us had the pleasure of sitting "At Jebba's Table" through her column on food and entertaining in a local newspaper. Then, as 2006 drew to a close, everything changed.

She and her husband Larry were selling the Chatham house he'd inherited from his mother, the place they'd called home since 1992. It was a wonderful house, full of light and life. Its fabulous kitchen was ideally suited for testing recipes and creating the sumptuous food, accompanied by treasures from Larry's wine cellar, for many memorable dinner parties.

Amidst the stress of saying goodbye to all that – deciding what to keep and what to give away, what to store and what to take along to the small cottage on loan from a friend until they could move into their new home in South Orleans – Jebba found herself in Cape Cod Hospital. Atrial fibrillation earned her two trips to the ER and a three-day stay.

Jebba and Larry have been married

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Handley

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for 27 years. Before that, she was a single mother of three girls and a creative artist with an entrepreneurial spirit. While living in California in the 1960s, she started a needle-point business that eventually had 52 locations nationwide. She's been a textile and jewelry designer, a party coordinator, a watercolor painter. She also writes essays and short stories, several of which have been published in small literary magazines. One of her stories captured first prize in the 2001 PrimeTime Cape Cape writing contest.

At 72, Jebba is an elegant woman.

Her silver hair harmonizes with the glowing colors of the clothes she wears. Her sense of style extends to her home, which is filled with sculpture, paintings, and objets d'art. Among the most fascinating is a collection of 18 majolica oyster plates, each a different design, that hangs above the dining table. If one had to choose a single word to describe Jebba and her surroundings, it would be abundance. It's a wonderful quality in many ways, but it has not always been good for her.

Jebba has been fighting overweight her entire life, she says. She's lost track of how many diets she's been on. Considering the number of pounds she's lost, she ought to be rail thin. The trouble is, she's always gained it all back again.

The episode of atrial fibrillation was a turning point. "That scared me," she admits. Although she points to stress as a cause of the dangerously irregular heartbeat, she also knew she had to do something about her weight. "It really made me straighten up and say, 'Okay, gotta

do this,' in a serious way."

She was lucky to have the support of TOPS-Take Off Pounds Sensibly, a nonprofit weight-loss organization, with a Chatham chapter that meets at the Council on Aging every Tuesday afternoon. TOPS Clubs, Inc. was founded in 1948. Today, it has chapters worldwide, five of them on Cape Cod: Brewster, Yarmouthport, Hyannis, and East Falmouth, in addition to the Chatham group.

Jebba is 100 percent committed to TOPS and her chapter in particular. "It is very supportive and there's not a lot of hoopla. They're all just

there with you," she says, adding, "A lot of people have lost a lot of weight."

She's currently 50 pounds lighter than she was in September 2006. Her goal is to lose another 80. Like many other TOPS members, she intends to keep going to meetings even when she reaches that landmark. She knows well that losing weight is only half the battle. Keeping it off is a lifelong challenge.

Unlike commercial weight-loss organizations, with high fees and paid group leaders, TOPS meetings are run by the members themselves and the price is negligible.

TOPS operates by a few simple rules: Keep a record of everything you eat. Come to meetings. Weigh in before every meeting. Exercise. Other than that, it's a matter of what works for each individual. There is no

prescribed diet, no food or formulas to buy. Barbara Waters, current president of the Chatham chapter, explains that the chapters serve mainly as support groups. Unlike commercial weight-loss organizations, with high fees and paid group leaders, TOPS meetings are run by the members themselves and the price is negligible.

Meetings cost \$1, over and above the annual \$24 fee, which entitles members to attend a TOPS meeting

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anywhere in the world. There's a \$1 penalty for those who don't hand in their weekly food diary, and a quarter for each pound gained. Unexcused absences cost another dollar. It all goes into a fund to pay for the occasional speaker.

Fifteen minutes before each hour-long meeting, members line up to be weighed. The meeting starts with attendees introducing themselves and stating how many pounds they lost or gained since the previous week. Those whose weight has remained the same say they "turtled." The member who has lost most for the week gets the kitty into which everyone has put a quarter or a piece of fruit. Small change for big changes.

Over the course of each gathering, people share strategies for sensible eating and exercise. Some meetings feature a nutritionist or other outside speaker, but most of the time, members take turns making a presentation.

It was Jebba's turn just before Thanksgiving. Her topic: How to get through the coming holidays. She started by passing around a platter of spicy oven-roasted tomatoes, party finger food that was as laden with flavor as it was devoid of calories. She ended by handing out a packet of recipes. From soup to dessert, each was low in fat but sure to be delicious. In between, she shared tips on eating sensibly, not just during the holidays but every day, for the rest of your life. Among them:

- Cook and eat really good tasting food. There's no point in wasting calories on food you don't enjoy.

- Take your time. Savor every bite. Sip wine or water. Make conversation. Enjoy the entire experience of sharing a meal.

- When eating out, choose something you really like but take half of it home for another meal.

- Wherever you are, pay attention to what you're eating and when you've had enough. If you wait a few minutes before reaching for seconds, you may find you are no longer hungry.

Along with many experts on diet

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Quickhits

WebLinks

Visit the national TOPS Clubs Web site to learn more about the organization, locate the nearest chapter, and find valuable information, tools, and links.

www.tops.org

Information about the Chatham chapter, including upcoming programs, can be found at:

www.chathamtops.org

Search the archive of At Jebba's Table for past columns and recipes.

www.atjebbastable.com

The pledge of the Chatham chapter of TOPS:

I pledge that I will try this week
 To keep in mind the goal I seek;
 To get some exercise each day,
 By walking, jogging ... any way
 To eat to live, not live to eat,
 To reach my goal without defeat.
 So by this creed I'll live each day,
 And I'll weigh less each time I weigh.



Portions in America have gotten bigger and bigger. And we don't need all that food. We just don't.

JEBBA HANDLEY, CHATHAM
 TOPS MEMBER

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and nutrition, Jebba believes the secret is portion control. "We need to eat less," she insists. "Portions in America have gotten bigger and bigger. And we don't need all that food. We just don't."

She employs such tricks as filling plates in the kitchen rather than at the table. They are all beautifully arranged, but hers has smaller portions. When bowls and platters are on the table, she makes sure the vegetables are nearby and the meat, sauces, and starchy foods are out of reach. If she is tempted to have more, she has to think about it and ask for it. The mindfulness required usually tells her she's had enough. Instead, she sits back, sips some wine or mineral water, and enjoys the conversation.

She avoids foods she knows she can't resist, and reserves certain favorites – fried oysters and clams, for example – for once-a-year treats. As for desserts, she never orders them. Instead, she takes a tiny taste from Larry's plate and savors it.

The good news is that Jebba got through Christmas and lost two pounds.

Jebba's last food column appeared at the end of 2006. "I could no lon-

ger be so food centered," she said. But she hasn't stopped writing. She is currently at work on a memoir that traces the circuitous path from her birth into an artistic family, her privileged upbringing in Manhattan, her life as an artist and business-woman, wife, mother, and grandmother, and the journey that led her to California, Israel, Italy, Greece, and finally home to Cape Cod.

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome. A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment. She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.

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– which is now co-owned, it turns out, by Serious Consequences Mortgage Company – when the inevitable awkwardness of credit card balances came up. Nothing to concern oneself about, I reassured oneself. A short laugh and a debonair toss of my head as I said "Oh, a couple thousand – something like that," I thought, would dispose of the question. But the lady with the enormous shell-rimmed bifocals didn't even try to put "something like that" into the colored rectangle of the computer screen in front of her. She just folded her hands and waited and let me dribble the truth of the matter, card by overdue card, a condition sometimes referred to, in as sprightly a fashion as a man can manage, as "maxed out."

Luckily, that very same day I managed to contact a private lender who keeps office hours in the rear of the local pool hall. Commendably conscious of unnecessary overhead expense, he didn't have a computer. In fact, once he'd checked my driver's license for current home address, all he said was, "I know where you live," and he went back to cleaning his fingernails with a long blade which slipped neatly back into its handle when he'd finished grooming. He said something about "just come up with the vigorish on Friday, 'cause I hate having to work on weekends," but he didn't seem to much care one way or another. Obviously, he's more of a free spirit than the accounting types. He probably never even took Business Accounting 101. More of a Sociology major, I would guess.

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