

From the Archives...

An Interview with Dateline NBC's Josh Mankiewicz

by Kimberley Debus

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Josh Mankiewicz did not expect to become a celebrity in the low carb community. In fact, he thought he was just doing a short piece for *Dateline NBC*, to follow up the July 2002 *New York Times* article about low carbing. Funny how a five-minute segment can change your life.

Mankiewicz's newfound popularity led me to contact him for an interview – he in his office at NBC studios in LA, me in my living room in North Carolina. “So tell me a bit about your weight loss history,” I asked.

As a kid and into adulthood, being overweight was not an issue – in fact, he was scrawny and was “encouraged to eat a lot.” This continued through college, where he, like many college students, was very active. However, like many college kids, he ate pizza and drank beer – a habit that continued as he started his career at a local television station in Washington, DC. Suddenly, without the constant activity, he put on weight, and in 1980 was given a directive by his boss to lose 10 pounds.

He did – he lost somewhere between 10 and 25 pounds – and this made the producers happy. But eventually, the weight crawled back on.

“I gained it all back, until I was stationed in the Middle East for ABC, and I could find nothing to eat.” Mankiewicz figured it was “fate telling me to eat less.”

But when he returned to the United States, he didn't change his way of eating; he just began to eat again.

“Of course,” Mankiewicz admits, “in this line of work, you are constantly eating on the run, in the car, in the fan, in hotels, and at weird hours. It's easy to overeat, and to eat the wrong stuff.” Add to this the new USDA food pyramid, which said “stop eating all that beef! Eat pasta and rice!” It's no wonder Mankiewicz found himself 47 pounds overweight by the late 1990s.

And then, like many of us, Mankiewicz had a life-changing encounter.

He was in San Francisco on a story for *Dateline NBC* and ran into a woman he'd known in Los Angeles. “I almost didn't recognize her, she was so thin.” He asked her what she did.

at night, and I can lift my left arm without pain.

I attribute getting my life back to low-carb eating. If I had known how easy it was to be this healthy, I would have done it when I was 25 and saved

my body from having to get so sick. Now my doctor calls me the “poster-child” for getting your health back.

I bless Dr. Atkins for his per-

severance and pioneering spirit. Without him, and all those that continue his research on low-carb eating, it's impact on blood sugar, and the body, I would not have had the “low-carb tools” to get my life back, and be looking forward to many more healthy, happy birthdays.

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“Easy,” she replied. “Atkins.”

Mankiewicz says that this one conversation sealed it. “I’ve known her for years. She has less willpower than I have, so if she could do it, I knew I could.” He went out to buy *Atkins New Diet Revolution* (which was just gaining in newfound popularity), and started Induction on November 23, 1998. By January 4 – and through the holidays – he had lost 24 pounds, and by March 17, he’d lost 39 pounds. During the summer, his weight loss slowed down – partly because he was close to goal, partly because there was no longer the imperative to drop weight – but by December 13, he had lost a total of 47 pounds.

In early 1999, *Dateline NBC* scheduled a story on Dr. Atkins.

Noticing that Mankiewicz had begun losing weight on Atkins, they asked him if he wanted to do the report.

“Absolutely not.”

I asked him why, since I know that I became almost rabid with my promotion of the low carb way of eating.

“I was still new to it and wasn’t entirely sure.”

But then, three years later, low carbing made headlines again, culminating in an extensive article by Gary Taubes in the

New York Times Magazine in July 2002. *Dateline NBC* producers asked Mankiewicz again about doing a story, and this time he said yes.

The segment, which aired on July 16, 2002, covered Mankiewicz’s own experience, as well as input from both sides of the low carb story – most notably from Barry Sears and Dean Ornish (the complete transcript can be found at <http://www.msnbc.com/news/780727.asp>).

“I was terrified to do the story,” Mankiewicz told me. “I couldn’t even watch it on TV. After all, I’m out there telling millions of people ‘I used to be a big fat pig – look at me.’” And we did look at him – picture after picture of him, overweight – and eating.

And then there was the response.

“Most of the time,” Mankiewicz said, “when people write in after a segment, they are angry”. The typical big story brings around 100,000 hits to *Dateline NBC*’s website. Within a day after his segment, hundreds of eMails poured in – and the site got over 600,000 hits.

“I was surprised at the nature of the angry eMails – those who were opposed to low carbing reflected a colossal vitriol of opposition. I was astounded that people were so angry. I got eMails with



statements like ‘I hope you choke on a piece of steak and die.’”

But the positive eMails were also astounding, and accounted for more than 60% of the total response. “Hundreds of eMails praised my ‘taking on the low fat establishment.’” Mankiewicz was told about low carb web sites, stores, and products – and he discovered that there is a low carb community – that had “such wonderful things to say about me and the segment.”

“There aren’t many times as a journalist that you know that what you’ve done has changed lives. But after this first segment, I had the feeling I’d made a difference.”

I asked Mankiewicz about the response within the office. “It was split, as you’d expect. Some people thought it was great, and others actually got angry. “Keith Morrison walked up to me the next day and said ‘I liked your piece, and I think you’re dead wrong.’” Mankiewicz encouraged Morrison to do a response – not for balance, but because there was momentum. Mankiewicz was already planning his follow-up segment, which aired a week later.

When Morrison did his piece, the response was again surprising. “Hundreds wrote to Keith – and to me – to tell us how wrong he was.”

Mankiewicz believes the controversy around low carbing will be around for a while, but like most low carbers, he knows the proof is in his personal results. “So many people said to me ‘Dr. Atkins saved my life’ – and to that, I say ‘me too.’” He is more slender, he sleeps better, he has no more heartburn, no more back problems, and overall, has a much better self-image. “Knowing I can do this for the rest of my life brings relief and a peace of mind. It’s no longer something I hate about myself.”

I asked Mankiewicz for some words of wisdom – keys to low carb success. “Buy the book, take your vitamins, drink your water, and don’t take shortcuts.” He also said “remember, low carb diets are not about what you’re eating, but about what you’re NOT eating. Don’t take someone else’s word for it – go on your own diet.” And of course, he recommends checking with your doctor before starting – if nothing else, for a benchmark.

And finally, Mankiewicz suggests, “don’t believe the bull against low carbing – believe the science, and the results. The people who say low carbing is wrong speak with a volume and anger that is the same as those who said the earth was flat.”