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## “I Did It for Me!”

In an exclusive interview and photo shoot, a sexy, toned and 35 pounds lighter Phylicia Rashad lets us in on her weight loss secrets

BY NYKIA SPRADLEY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELANIE DUNEA

It was nearly impossible for stage and screen star Phylicia Rashad to avoid images of her slimmer past. The rest of us can hide college photos, store away dusty workout gear, and give away body-hugging dresses to avoid confronting weight gain. But last year when Rashad turned on her TV, it was staring her in the face. She saw a younger, thinner version of herself on an episode of *The Cosby Show*. “I was so light, and I’m not just talking about being slender,” Rashad explains as a makeup artist dabs on foundation to prep her for our photo shoot. “I looked at that screen and remembered how I wasn’t carrying anybody’s weight but my own at that time.”

Somewhere in the midst of her hectic life as a working mother, she had allowed the weight of her world to comfortably make

She lost **35 lbs!**  
And she ate indulgent foods like cake, enchiladas and fish and chips.

Phylicia Rashad, 61  
Height: 5' 6"  
Weight lost: 35 lbs  
How long it took: 7 months



STYLING: ELISA BACI; HAIR: VICKI ABBEY; MAKEUP: C. FORD; PHOTO: BEYONCE PHOTO, COURTESY OF JENNY CHAN

“I was so light, and I’m not just talking about being slender.”



1990  
Seeing herself as Clair Huxtable on TV last year made Rashad want to get back to her slimmer self.

#### The Shut-eye Solution

Rashad attributes much of her weight gain to lack of sleep. “Sometimes when you think you’re hungry, you’re really just tired,” she explains. “Also, if you don’t get enough rest, you’re not going to lose weight.” And she’s right: A 16-year study published in 2006 showed that women who sleep five hours or less a night tend to weigh more than women who sleep seven hours a night.



Rashad practices Floor-Barre technique, a gentle way of strengthening and lengthening muscles.

herself at home on her 5-foot, 6-inch frame. For her, that weight came in the form of responsibilities for her family—getting her kids off to school each day, grocery shopping, and preparing meals daily—on top of a demanding performing schedule. And it started to show. Last year Rashad found herself out of breath while trying to climb three flights of stairs. “The best way to take care of your family is to take care of yourself. I realized I didn’t want to carry the weight anymore,” Rashad says in the soft-spoken and motherly tone of the Clair Huxtable she had been watching on the screen. “I thought, I want to go back to that.” Coincidentally, her “aha” moment happened to be around the same time that Jenny Craig approached her to help her figure out how to transform herself. It was on.

If you’ve ever been famished by the end—or in the middle—of a long day, you’ve experienced one of Rashad’s pitfalls that packs on pounds: overindulging. But it wasn’t random fridge raids for sweet treats that reduced the award-winning leading lady who has recently appeared onstage in August: *Osage County* and *Cymbeline*. Her temptation was cooking up large meals,

no matter what time of the day it was. Many midnights after her theater performances she’d whip up a big plate of catfish and grits, justifying the indulgence in her mind by adding a side of greens. It wasn’t until meeting with a Jenny Craig program consultant to trace the habits that led to her weight gain that she realized a lack of portion control and late-night eating were at the root of her problem.

In order to avoid eating so late, she paced herself and ate every two and half to three hours throughout the day, whether she was hungry or not. “When you eat like this, your metabolism is constantly working,” explains Rashad, who bypassed the generous slices of carrot cake and pizza on the set of our photo shoot to indulge in seasoned shrimp and vegetables instead. “By the time you’ve had that last meal—and even before you get to it—you’re not hungry.”

Surprisingly, the discipline of consuming small meals wasn’t that difficult a transition for the stage star. In a true test of restraint, she started her new meal plan the week of Thanksgiving. While many people may have just indulged—eating everything in sight as if it were >

## PHYLICIA'S RULES FOR SUCCESS

**Made-to-order menu:** Rashad personalized the prepared Jenny Craig meals by seasoning them with garlic powder, cayenne pepper and basil. She also thawed them in her fridge and then cooked them in the oven (not the microwave). “It tastes better,” she says.

**Savvy shopping:** Once Rashad started losing weight she began adding some of her own home-cooked meals to the mix, like broiled (not fried) fish with vegetables. This kept her from becoming dependent on the prepared meals and got her ready for her transition to cooking on her own again.

**Scale smarts:** She advocates giving yourself a break when it comes to a little bit of weight gain: “Allow yourself one to two pounds, but you don’t want to gain five. If you have, you’ve gone off your program. You know what to do to put yourself back on track.”

“Taking care of yourself first has a domino effect because you want to get rid of other things around you that don’t serve you.”



their last meal—Rashad did the opposite. She saw the holiday as a prime opportunity to exercise control. “The adjustment with the portion sizes was a revelation,” she says. “We really do eat more food than we need to.” On Thanksgiving Day she consumed three small meals and still managed to lose five pounds that first week.

Overall, the consultant, whom she met with once a week, helped Rashad establish a daily caloric intake, a weight loss goal of 30 pounds and a specific menu of Jenny Craig foods for those five meals a day. Rashad also realized some of her success was about simple mathematical choices. “You can have a 1,200-calorie-a-day diet and eat 12 bags of chips or have 1,200 calories worth of healthy meals,” says the actress who has appeared on *Everybody Hates Chris* and *Psych*. Still, what Rashad liked about the plan she was on was that it didn’t focus on eliminating particular foods. “My favorite of all things is the lemon cake,” she reveals. Her other loves included silver dollar pancakes, cheesy enchiladas and fish and chips.

In a two-pronged attack, Rashad combined her diet changes with some of her favorite exercises. At least four times a week she rides a recumbent bike for 30 minutes. “Depending on how fast you go on a recumbent bike you burn almost 200 calories in a half hour. That’s breakfast!” Rashad explains. She follows that ride with some light weight lifting. “Because I don’t want to look like Tarzan,” she jokes. “I want to look like Jane.” To stretch out her muscles and realign her body after physically demanding performances or just a busy day, she also takes Floor-Barre classes several times a week. In it, ballet moves, such as grand plié, are done while on the floor. It’s one of Rashad’s favorite

ways of strengthening and stretching her muscles.

For Rashad, keeping track of a number on the scale was significantly less important to her than how she felt, and she encourages others to think the same. “Think about your health and your overall well-being, and how nice it is to feel the core of your body when you move about doing the several things you do healthily, without angst,” she says. “It’s wonderful to take care of yourself first. It has a domino effect because you want to get rid of other things around you that don’t serve you.”

As she prepares to take on the role of Big Mama again in an upcoming London production of the Tennessee Williams play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Rashad notes that people would love it if she were 50 pounds heavier for the part. “Guess what?” she says. “It is not going to happen.”

## WHAT SHE ENJOYS ABOUT SLIMMING DOWN

- 1. An easy exhale.** Remember that fight of stairs that took Rashad’s breath away? “I can walk up that same flight carrying luggage now,” she brags. “I can run up them too and be fine.”
- 2. A tightening of her belt.** Old clothes are now too big for her. Rashad’s solution? Repeat trips to the tailor. “I keep going to get clothes taken in,” she says.
- 3. A satisfied sweet tooth.** Still being able to eat the foods that she loves—but in decent portion sizes—is a joy. “We don’t need all this supersizing,” she says. “Come on now. It’s just over the top!”



Maximize healthy salads and minimize calories.