

'I'VE BEEN ON A DIET SINCE I WAS 12'

General Hospital's Genie Francis talks about 'starving' herself as a teen, her latest attempt to lose 30 lbs.—and how food came to replace her onetime alcohol addiction **BY ASHLEY WILLIAMS**



"I was petrified about my body all through my career," says Francis (above, in Maine, where she runs a home-furnishings store; right, with Anthony Geary as Luke on *General Hospital*, in 1981).

When asked about the first time she ever went on a diet, Genie Francis has to think back—all the way back, to a grade school picture of herself in her Brownie uniform that she felt made her look "like a sausage," she recalls. "So I starved myself in the sixth grade—I'd eat two bites of whatever my mother put on my plate. It was one of the crazy dieting things that kids do." As she talks about that phase while relaxing in the sitting room of her cozy bayside home in Belfast, Maine, Francis recognizes it as an important turning point. "That was when," she says, "I was just starting to be aware of looking good."

It's an awareness she has never lost; in fact, Francis, now 45, admits that her physical appearance



"has been a lifelong obsession and battle"—one fueled by the pressure to be thin when she began starring on the daytime soap *General Hospital* in 1976. Even though she weighed less than 120 lbs., at age 15 she faced a "mortifying" storyline: Her character, Laura, was put on a diet, which Francis felt was a signal from the show's producers to lose weight. She then tried a liquid diet on her own. "Already I was engaging

in dangerous, reckless dieting behavior," says Francis, adding that she later "made myself ill" at the thought of having to wear a leotard in a scene with exercise guru Richard Simmons. "It was just an ongoing thing that I didn't look good enough," says Francis. "I have that in my heart today. It hurts."

Which is why she has decided—very publicly—to make what may be her final attempt at losing weight. "As I've gotten older, there's been a sort of giving up," she admits. "But I'm unhappy being a



"She's feeling better about herself, and it's delightful," Frakes says about Francis (in '04).

size 12. It's the only thing that bothers me." On May 21 the 5'4" Francis became a spokeswoman for the Medifast weight-loss program (see box), hoping to lose 30 lbs. within a year and slim down enough to "feel pretty" when she walks the red carpet at the Daytime Emmy Awards on June 15. (She's nominated for outstanding supporting actress for her guest stint last fall on *GH*.) "This is the first time I've been nominated and able to go," she says, "and I want to feel proud."

That feeling has been a long time coming. Francis says that throughout her career on *GH*, "People were calling me chubby," even though she was a size 2 to 4. Adds Denise Alexander, who played Francis's mother on the show: "I never remember her being heavy except in her thinking that she was too heavy for the work she was doing." Then, in the early 1980s, Francis became hooked on cocaine and alcohol. "I definitely have a compulsive personality," she says, adding that her

substance-abuse problems prompted her to leave the show in 1982.

After turning to support groups for help, Francis managed to stay sober for two decades. But out of work in 2002 and living in London with her husband, Jonathan Frakes, 54, best known for playing Commander Riker on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and their children, Jameson, 12, and Eliza, 10, "I did not know what to do with myself, and I had a slip,"

"I always worry about my weight—I go out to an opening and think, 'Oh, I hope I don't look fat'"

she says. "I thought, 'I can have a glass of wine with dinner and go home.' But I couldn't."

A 21-day stint in rehab got her back on track—but also left her at a size 16, because "if you can't have a drink, you're in the Häagen-Dazs," she explains. And yet her husband insists, "She's a good-looking woman at any size!" adding, "I don't see that she has 30 lbs. to give, but I'm supportive and keeping sugar out of the house."

That kind of love has seen Francis through her lowest moments, like not having her *GH* guest contract renewed last fall. "I went through the sadness of that and stopped dieting," says Francis, who had hired a trainer and stuck to a 1,200-calorie-a-day diet to get in shape for the show. "I'm one to eat emotionally." No wonder then that Francis says the Medifast deal is "like the universe saying, 'Keep going, Genie.'" (She is also working out with her trainer three to four times a week.)

And with her clothes already "much looser," the actress has made a bold decision for her Daytime Emmys dress. "Everybody thinks if you wear black, you're trying to look thin," she says, smiling. "I'm wearing berry red!"

HER DIET PLAN

On Medifast, which is billed as a portion-controlled, low-calorie meal-replacement program, Francis will take in only about 1,000 calories a day—about 20 percent fewer than many other diet plans, but not so few that she would need medical supervision (generally recommended for diets of 800 calories or less). And while many experts worry that such severe calorie restriction may make

it difficult to "sustain substantial weight loss," says nutritionist Joan Salge Blake, a clinical assistant professor at Boston University, Francis insists, "I'll never be starving." The plan has her eating every two to three hours, choosing among Medifast products (like packaged chicken soup) that are sent to her and one "real" meal, such as 6 oz. of tuna on top of lettuce and 1 cup of steamed broccoli.