

Hawaii Tribune Herald

Battle of the BULGE

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Big Island camp offers youth a chance to shed weight and learn healthier lifestyles

NEAR HAKALAU -- For the last month, obese teens from around the world have called this mountain retreat their home.

Cell phones are confiscated; the 28 teens get to call home 10 minutes a week. The water comes from catchment or a nearby stream, which is then purified. The electricity is generated by solar power.

It's three miles from the turnoff of the Old Mamalahoa Highway, near Kolekole Beach Park, but for these campers, the off-grid site is worlds away from their sedentary lifestyle. They're here to lose weight and keep it off.

The camp is run by Wellspring Camps, a summer fitness and weight loss program that relies on high-adventure exercise, measured caloric intake and an eight- or four-week regimented program. Nine other camps are located on the U.S. mainland, in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Todd Duncan, 33, is the director of Wellspring Hawaii, and head of an eight-member staff. A ponytailed, energetic wilderness guide who serves as the camp medic, he's lived in Belize, Australia and New Zealand, and has a long history of working in Hawaii.

"We're a scientific and therapeutic-based program," Duncan said Thursday morning, as the campers ran a zig-zag pattern around macadamia nut trees on the large sloped front lawn.

This is the second year for Wellspring Hawaii, and camp leaders hope to stay for the long run.

It's a stretch to call this place a camp. Most of the year it is operated as the Tara Yoga Center, an expansive 40-acre tract of land near Akaka Falls State Park. Among the rolling green hills, a stream that feeds into Kahuna Falls and remnants of the sugar cane era is a group of blue buildings that serves as headquarters for the camp. The youths, ages 11 to 19, and all at least 25 pounds overweight at the start, roll out of bed at 6:30 a.m. for the morning exercise.



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Under the guidance of a staff member, center, campers take part in a footrace game called "reflex" at Wellspring Hawaii Thursday in near Hakalau. The spacious play area is spread over a gently sloping lawn that commands a sweeping view of the distant ocean. Youth from around the world meet here each summer to lose weight and learn better eating habits. - Photos By William Ing/Tribune-Herald



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Following a regimen of physical activity, hungry campers help themselves to "unrestricted" lunch items from the buffet table, such as pineapple, mango and papaya slices, sprouts, lettuce, and carrots. Photos by WILLIAM ING/Tribune-Herald

Each is given a pedometer and must record his steps throughout the day; 2,000 steps roughly equals a mile. By rule they must always carry a water bottle and an SMJ – a self-monitoring journal – in which every food item, calorie and fat gram is recorded. Along with the physical activity, campers are kept to between 800 and 1,200 calories a day.

Last week, the camp split into two groups for a three-day camping trip. One went across the island to Kahaluu Beach Park and Kaloko-Honaunau National Historical Park. The other group went to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park for trips to the lava entry site, Kilauea Iki and Namakani Paio.

Other trips might take them into Pololu Valley, Waipio Valley or Kolekole Beach Park, and there's a lot of physical activity that goes into each trip. Mornings at the base camp might involve a game of soccer or classic running games like "capture the flag."

Thursday's lunch, as all meals, were split into two tables. On one side of a dining room were the "restricted" food items – a hot dog bun (120 calories), a slice of cheese (30), 3/4 cup of pasta salad (147) and a 1/2 cup of potato-tomato soup. On the other table were the so-called "unrestricted" items, including a salad, mango slices and a thin piece of papaya.

Campers don't use napkins to save on waste, and the leftover scraps from the meals go into the compost heap.

For campers like Sean Dunckel, 17, of Napa Valley, Calif., the camp has paid off. Entering the program at 6-foot-2 and 248 pounds, he was obese, according to the body mass index. Now, at 220 pounds, he's looking forward to losing 25 pounds over the next four weeks. That would bring him down to a healthier weight of 195.

"I've lost about 30 pounds in three weeks," Dunckel said during a break in the morning activities. "It's hard work, but it's good."

Dunckel's mother learned about the camp on the Internet. Dunckel's first impression was that "it looks good, and it turns out to be real good. So it's everything that I've been looking for," he said.

He arrived in Hawaii – his second time to the Big Island – with a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

"You have to be able to put in the work," he said. Dunckel has gone from being unable to do a single pushup to doing at least 10, he said.



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Campers enjoy a filling but low-fat meal in the dining room after a round of strenuous activity outside. "Restricted" food items on Thursday's lunch menu included soup, cheese, pasta salad and a hot dog bun with cold cuts. Water was the sole beverage. - Photos By William Ing/Tribune-Herald

It's not easy adjusting to such a rigorous lifestyle, especially considering how many of these campers have spent mostly sedentary lives. He's had trouble with the sleep schedule.

"You only get eight hours of sleep a night," Dunckel said. "It was pretty hard the first week."

Others had more trouble. At least one camper was seen complaining to Duncan about being homesick and not being able to call his parents. For others, weight gain and loss generate their own challenges. Aki Morita, the camp's clinical director, conducts group and individual cognitive behavioral therapy sessions with the campers.

"The main role is providing clinical supervision. For them to focus on their weight loss, it's an extremely challenging task," Morita said. "They are bombarded by fast food advertisements in their daily lives." Weight loss is just one issue.

"Kids bring a variety of issues, from homesickness to depression to anxiety," she said. "Some develop medical issues. Some family issues, as well. And my philosophy is to support them whatever their trouble."

The principles of Wellspring Hawaii are based on the book "The Healthy Obsession" by Dr. Daniel Kirschenbaum, the director of the Center for Behavioral Medicine in Chicago. Kirschenbaum's book debunks notions about weight loss, including the Atkins Diet and the concept of eating in moderation. Instead, he stresses counting every calorie, which is one of the three tenets of the Wellspring philosophy. The second tenet involves taking thousands of steps a day, and the third is modifying the behavior so the campers can keep the pounds off after they return home.

To that end, Duncan said, the camp features nutrition classes and culinary classes, and even an after-camp program online.

"There's a culinary class and we teach them how to cook," Duncan said. "They made a lot of the foods they eat." Thursday's class, for example, was taught by Will Sanderson, the full-time chef whose family owns the Tara Yoga Center. Other days, the menu might include sushi or fat-free cookies.

While the campers get lighter, their parents' wallets are doing the same. The four-week session costs \$6,950 and the eight-week session is \$9,950, although there is a \$1,500 kamaaina discount. Hawaii kids have attended camps in the past, but this year everyone comes from abroad. The 2008 crop includes youth from New Zealand, London, Mexico, Japan, Thailand, Texas, Georgia, New York, Colorado and California.

The first four-week Wellspring camp started June 22 and wrapped up Sunday; the second session starts immediately after. Many, like Holly Tarbell, 13, are staying for the full eight weeks.

Tarbell comes from Corona Del Mar, about an hour south of Los Angeles. She entered the Wellspring camp a month ago at 162 pounds; now she's 143. In the second session she wants to lose 20 more pounds, which would also put her in the normal BMI category. Tarbell's always been active, so the running around doesn't faze her.

"I just came to learn how to be healthy and eat right," she said.



In an afternoon culinary class in the camp kitchen, Chef Will Sanderson shows campers how to concoct fat-free brownies. Campers will return home with an awareness of the role diet plays in their lives and a foundation for integrating sound eating habits into their daily routines.