

The Mountaineer

Wellspring camp helps youths lose weight

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All her life, 15-year-old Amy Tyler has been embarrassed by her weight. When she speaks about it now, however, a disarmingly sweet smile flashes across her face. She's proud to say that she has lost 25 pounds in the last six weeks. Now, she only has 50 more to go. "I thought I'd be heavy forever," she said. "And now I feel I can do anything." Stories like hers aren't uncommon at Wellspring Adventure Camp, a weightloss treatment center near Cruso aimed at children 10 to 18. Every summer, hundreds of youngsters from around the world come to this out-of-the-way spot with one goal in mind — to change. "I'm just tired of being overweight, because it holds you back from doing other things," Tyler said.

She, like those who attend the several Wellspring facilities across the US and United Kingdom, arrived knowing that she would have to work hard for her own evolution. Wellspring campers spend the majority of their days (which usually start around 6:30 a.m.) on their feet. Within a span of hours, they might hike, play basketball and swim, with only a handful of scheduled breaks between each activity. During "adventure" trips away from base camp, they might rock climb or raft. During their entire stay at Wellspring, they're nearly constantly in motion.

Counselor supervisor Lisa Barrows, who has worked at the camp for three years, explained that this explosion of physical activity is all part of the Healthy Obsession Program, which was created by Wellspring founder Daniel Kirschenbaum. HOP, as the campers call it, has three main tenets:

walk 10,000 steps a day, eat as little fat as possible and constantly monitor calories and fat.

Barros knows that for many of the campers, these changes are monumental.

“We do tell them it’s not going to be easy,” she said.

Luckily, they know they don’t have to brave it alone. Part of the appeal of Wellspring is its abundance of resources. During sessions that range from four to 12 weeks, campers work closely with a team of nutrition, culinary and standard camp counselors in an attempt to make their new, healthy habits stick. In addition, campers get two weekly group and two individual sessions with behavioral psychologists. Often, Barros sees this focused attention work wonders, even for the more introverted campers of the bunch.

“Throughout the summer, you see these quiet kids become these outgoing kids that will talk your ear off,” she said. “It’s crazy. It’s awesome.”

Sarah Westin, 11, is one such camper. She explained that in her eight weeks at Wellspring, she’s done more than lose 25 pounds. She has managed to surprise herself.

“Every time I look in the mirror, I just say ‘wow,’” she said.

Already, she can see the difference in her narrower face and thinner thighs. Where she used to have no muscle at all, she now sees definition. Finally, it feels like she’s growing out of her baby fat, something she feared might never happen.

“I can’t believe this is already working,” she said. “I feel so great about it.”

She admits that she sticks out in her everyday life at home in Huntersville. At school, she gets teased because of her weight and her good grades. At Wellspring, however, she blends in, as she’s just another young person working to make herself healthy. Knowing that everyone is dealing with the same struggle makes her feel “hopeful,” she said.

“I have so many great friends here,” she said, “and the experience is so awesome.”

It’s this possibility of success that convinces families to send their children to Wellspring camps every year, despite the hefty price tag. With all costs included, a four-week session is nearly \$6,500 at the Cruso facility, explained program supervisor Michaela Clinton. While scholarships are sometimes available and insurance occasionally foots a portion of the bill, families often still spend thousands on the program. For many, however, the cost is minor compared with the results. As Clinton sees it, part of Wellspring’s job is to show young people what’s possible.

Often, all they need is a taste of success to become motivated to live healthfully in the future.

“If we can somehow magically insert the will to want this, I know they can do this,” she said.

Wellsprings’ statistics back this up. On average, the vast majority of campers lose a great deal of weight at the camps and about 70 percent of them are able to keep it off and often continue to lose more. The healthy regimen installed in these campers makes such an impact that many say

they aren't concerned about sticking to the HOP plan in future. For them, the rewards are too great to stop.

As camper Peter Vercellino explained it: "It's not a summer thing. It's a lifestyle thing."

Though he'd never say it himself, the 15-year-old is a model of Wellspring weight loss success. During his first week at camp, he dropped 12 pounds. Now, after nine weeks, he's down 68. His time here not only represents a change in weight, however, but perspective. Before coming to camp, Vercellino didn't think of himself as heavy, he explained. In fact, he had hardly thought of his weight at all and had always put things like work, school and friends in front of his health. This summer has been his time to set those priorities straight.

Losing weight has been nice, he said, "but the main focus is to get healthy and turn my life around."

Already, the native of Decatur, Illinois has noticed that everything in his body is "better than it was." It's easier to walk and run. He's happier now and doesn't get as hot tempered as he used to. In every way he can imagine, he feels healthier. For him, the beauty of Wellspring has been this surge of wellbeing, not the weight lost.

"I don't care if I'm 6'2 and paper thin, as long as I'm nice and pretty friendly," he said. "Life's too short to care what people think of me."

To learn more about Wellspring Adventure Camp, visit www.wellspringadventurecamp.com or call (866) 364-0808.