

Cool Camp: Youth gains knowledge, good health while losing pounds at N.C. facility

By Leslie Snow (Contact)
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After Wellspring, J.J. reached his goal weight and reduced his body mass index from 30 to 22.

There's pain in Bonnie Harlow's eyes when she tells the story, but she tells it anyway. She wants people to know what her son, J.J. Russell, 12, has been through. She wants them to understand all he's accomplished. "We were at the Oak Ridge Pool and there was this kid there that didn't know J.J. was my son. He saw him get out of the water after a dive and started teasing him about his weight and calling him names. He wouldn't stop. Then the boy realized I was his mother. It was terrible."

But it wasn't just the teasing that made Bonnie realize she had to help her son change his life. "I think the thing that made me recognize I had to do something was the constant candy wrappers I would find in his bedroom and his pockets. It made me see that he was eating on the sly more than I realized."



Bonnie Harlow, right in family photo, said a newspaper article on weight loss camps gave her hope that son J.J. Russell (in striped shirt) could lose weight and improve his health.



J.J. Russell, second from left, poses with some of his fellow campers (unidentified) at the Wellspring Adventure Camp in North Carolina.

Then an Associated Press story about weight-loss camps ran in the News Sentinel, and gave Bonnie reason to hope. "I held on to the article for about two months before I got the nerve to start talking with him about it. Then I told him about this cool camp with all these great outdoor activities. I didn't mention the nutritional aspect of it, but when he saw the Web site he took one look at it and said, 'Oh, my mom wants to send me to a fat camp.' "

J.J. wasn't thrilled with the idea of going to a weight-loss camp, but he knew he had a problem. "I used to just sit at the computer or in front of the TV and eat fat-filled foods, calorie-filled foods. I wasn't getting much exercise."

J.J. also had health problems. He had a brain aneurysm at the age of 9 and two major brain surgeries. And with his weight gain, he developed dangerously high cholesterol, blood sugar levels and triglycerides. When his pediatrician told him he was pre-diabetic, it scared him enough that he agreed to give the Wellspring Adventure Camp a chance.

Wellspring, in the Blue Ridge Mountains about 35 miles southwest of Asheville, focuses on good



Before attending Wellspring Adventure Camp, J.J. Russell was pre-diabetic and had high cholesterol, blood sugar levels and triglycerides.

nutrition and increased activity. Campers are expected to take 10,000 steps a day by participating in activities such as hiking, rock climbing and street hockey. They also work with professionals who help them change the behaviors that have kept them overweight.

The night before he was supposed to leave for camp, J.J. told his brother he wished he'd never agreed to go to Wellspring. "I wasn't nervous," he said, "I just didn't want to go." He changed his mind, however, when he saw the facility.

"I saw the camp and it looked cool. It felt like a regular camp, but at the same time you're losing weight and eating healthy foods that taste good. I had a lot of fun and made a lot of new friends."

In fact J.J. liked camp so much, he called his mother and asked if he could stay longer. Bonnie thought he'd be excited about coming home, "but he called the morning I was supposed to pick him up and said, 'Before we get started I have a

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question: Can I stay another four weeks?' "

During his eight weeks at Wellspring Adventure Camp, J.J. lost 31 pounds, reached his goal weight, and reduced his body mass index from 30 to 22. And he brought his new healthy habits home with him. He maintains his 10,000 steps by running, playing soccer and walking regularly. And he's traded fast food for home-cooked meals.

He hopes other overweight children will hear his story and realize they can change their life, too. "I want other kids to know they should watch what they eat and find good foods that they like and are healthy for them. And get some exercise, it can be fun!"

J.J.'s weight loss has made his life better. "I'm surprised at how differently people treat me now. They're a lot nicer. I feel really good about myself. Now, when we go to the pool I don't feel

embarrassed to take my shirt off. It feels really good that I can go on a five-mile walk and make it through."

You can learn more Wellspring Camps at www.wellspringcamps.com, and for information about scholarship opportunities for programs like Wellspring, go to www.LouiesKids.org.