

Teens describe their success shedding pounds at weight loss camps

By Michelle McQuigge (CP) – October 9, 2009

Rachel Ribeiro began life as a teenager under a cloud. A lifelong battle with her weight had left her reluctant to appear at family functions, fearful of shopping with friends and hesitant to take part in sports.

By age 14 she was 60 pounds over what her doctor deemed to be a healthy weight for her height, despite enrolment in formal programs meant to bring the issue under control.

Anxiety for both her health and social prospects prompted Ribeiro and her family to research summer camps that would help her shed the pounds once and for all, only to find that such facilities were scarce in Canada.

Hope revived when Wellspring, a U.S.-based mainstay of the youth weight loss movement, opened its first Canadian facility in Squamish, B.C., for the summer of 2009.

With the support of her parents, Ribeiro enrolled for a four-week session at the camp in spite of fears that her summer activities would be scorned or ridiculed by potentially judgmental peers.

"This was for me. I've been trying to get healthy, and if this can help, why shouldn't I go," Ribeiro said in a telephone interview from her home near Vancouver.

Her decision plunged her into an intensive, multi-faceted program that comprised low-calorie eating, rigorous physical activity, group and individual counselling and educational classes.

Ribeiro and her fellow campers began each day with a five-kilometre walk, then proceeded to tackle a wide variety of sports including floor hockey, volleyball, kickboxing and surfing. Interspersed among the physical activities were group sessions in cognitive behaviour therapy, nutrition classes and courses designed to teach the art of healthy cooking.

While individual counselling sessions took place a few times a week, most activities were accomplished in groups where campers experienced the sort of peer bonding they were often denied at school.

Ribeiro returned home 17 pounds lighter and with a confidence her mother Bess says she had never exhibited.

"She didn't like herself. She didn't want to go out or go to places. If she couldn't find anything to wear she'd say 'I'm staying at home,'" Bess Ribeiro said. "After camp, the transformation was amazing."

Thirteen-year-old Motria Iwan of Winnipeg attributes weight loss camp to a similarly drastic change in her life.

At age 11, her hatred of physical activity and her large size left her feeling ostracized from her leaner, more active classmates.

"They'd be playing soccer or something and I was always too tired to play, so I'd be sitting down and not doing anything," she said. "It was one of the reasons they wouldn't accept me, because I never wanted to do any physical activity."

Iwan says she would have remained on the sidelines if her mother hadn't stepped in and insisted she attend a month at Wellspring. After initial resistance to the idea, Iwan soon embraced the camp lifestyle and went on to shed 20 pounds.

Her experience was so positive that she returned to Wellspring for the next two summers, trying a different facility each time and finally winding up in Squamish last July.

Those three sessions saw her lose a total of 52 pounds, not including the weight she continued to shed during the intervening school years as she threw herself wholeheartedly into her school's athletic program. Volleyball practice and track meets now form a regular part of her after-school routine, and her efforts for the school basketball team were honoured last year when she was named most valuable player.

Iwan's camp days have also radically altered her home life, where all family members have embraced the tenets of Wellspring's low-fat eating philosophy and joined her in losing weight.

Such family support is critical if weight loss is to be sustained, according to Geoff Ball, director of the pediatric centre for weight and health at Edmonton's Stollery Children's Hospital.

He says parents act as "agents of change in the family," adding the onus is on them to build upon the gains initially made in programs such as Wellspring.

While Ball acknowledged that the weight loss camp model has its benefits, he says the approach has not been embraced by Canadians to the same degree as it has south of the border where such camps are prevalent.

Searches reveal just one other Canadian weight loss camp besides Wellspring's Vancouver facility - Ontario-based Active Challenge for females aged 12 to 18. Calls to Active Challenge staff were not returned.

Ball believes some of the resistance to weight loss camps stems from Canada's tradition of universal health care.

"Americans have a greater comfort with paying for their health services," he said. "The two-tier approach is sometimes not seen as the Canadian way."

The cost of a session at Wellspring is indeed steep and puts the program out of reach for some of the teens who could most benefit from the service.

Bess Ribeiro said her family had to "be creative" to find the more than \$6,000 needed to send Rachel to camp. But as she watches her daughter continue to lose weight - she has dropped another 12 pounds since returning home for a total loss of 29 - she believes the effort was more than worthwhile.

Iwan's mother, Dana Chlysta, agrees, calling the fees an investment in the future.

"Sometimes I think about the amount of money I've put in there, but for what (Motria's) future is holding now . . . you can't put a price on that."

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