

From Family's Pain, Hope for Obese Youths

Va. Man's Death Spurs Fund for Campers

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The three girls leaned forward and listened as the children of Louis S. Yuhasz detailed the humiliations of their father's everyday life.

"Big Louie" had been a well-known figure in Alexandria, where he ran the city's impound lot for 46 years. Weighing more than 500 pounds, he was so heavy that the city had to build him a special office chair. He couldn't bend over to tie his shoes, so he wore bedroom slippers to work.

It was painful to go out in public with his dad, son Louis H. Yuhasz recalled. "You become so much more acutely aware of the stares -- staring and leering and whispers," he said.

When Big Louie had a stroke in 2000, his children had to shuttle him from hospital to hospital trying to find one willing to take such a heavy patient, and doctors couldn't diagnose his stroke properly because there was no CAT machine big enough to hold him. After watching their father suffer for decades from obesity, they saw him die from its complications in 2001.



Tired campers Kelsey McDaniel and Ben Farber, foreground, lead a group up the trail during a hike. "I'll be ready to go walking at home. I could do this at home if I chose to," camper Brittany Grant of Camp Springs said.

Now, the Yuhasz siblings have a mission. As the number of obese children rises nationwide, the family is trying to change the lives of at least a few local overweight youngsters -- including the three girls raptly listening to Louis Yuhasz on this summer Saturday -- by awarding them scholarships to weight-loss camp.

"We know what you are feeling. We as a family witnessed it our whole lives," Yuhasz told the girls. "So we decided to do something about it. . . . Turn our anger into something more positive and possibly change your life. It's not about changing your body. It's about changing your life."

Called "Louie's Kids," the \$14,000 scholarship fund -- which the Yuhasz family scraped together with their own money and donations from friends -- sent seven children to the "healthy living" Wellspring Adventure Camp in the North Carolina mountains, including

Brittaney Grant, 11, of Camp Springs, Zoe Callahan, 10, of Fairfax County and Tia Norris-Towler, 13, of Alexandria.

Yuhasz told them he couldn't wait to see them blossom in the supportive atmosphere of the camp, where they would feel free to run and play -- even wear a bathing suit -- without ridicule.

"You are normal kids, and we want you to be able to act like normal kids," he said.

Craving Change

A few weeks later, as a cool night drew over the North Carolina mountains, Brittaney Grant flopped down on a log and said she wanted to quit. She had been at camp for one week.

She was bug-bit. She missed TV. She was being made to eat such "weird" food as tofu and quinoa. She was homesick for her family 320 miles away.

"I'm 50-50 on camp right now," she said. "I want to go home! I'm craving chocolate. Chocolate, chocolate chocolate! It's really *irking* me."

Yet, Brittaney had lost six pounds, more weight than she had dropped in her life. If her mom made her stay for the entire four weeks, and she continued to lose, Brittaney could sort of imagine how her life could change. She weighed more than 180 pounds when she arrived.

Camp "really teaches you that this is a daily process," Brittaney said. "You'll learn about it, and after a while [good habits] won't stop coming to you. I'll be ready to go walking at home. I could do this at home if I chose to."

Home: That's where she is a self-described "couch potato," where she lives with her mother, who also has a weight problem, and her grandmother, who makes a lemon meringue pie so delicious that grown men have been known to fight over it.

Experts have said the nation's obesity crisis can be blamed largely on the sedentary lives of children addicted to TV and computer games, families' dependence on convenience foods and supersize fast food.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 15 percent of the nation's youths ages 6 to 19 are overweight -- triple the rate of 1980.

The health consequences for obese youngsters are acute. Many of Brittaney's campmates suffer from asthma, sleep apnea, depression and diabetes. At Children's Hospital, the number of children treated in the Type 2 diabetes clinic -- the type of diabetes often spurred by excess weight and once seen primarily in adults -- has grown from one a year to one to two a month since 1995, said Susan Nunez, a pediatric endocrinologist.

And the emotional struggle takes a toll, as well.

Yuhasz and his sisters, Suzzanne Wike, 43, of Springfield and Rosemarie Yuhasz, 45, of Annandale, read the scholarship applications together, sometimes weeping over the stories of cruelty, ridicule and self-loathing.

"When I go over to my girlfriend's houses and they start trying on clothes, I just have to watch and giggle because I can't trade clothes with them," wrote middle-schooler Tia Norris-Towler. "Also when we go to the mall . . . I can never shop with them [because] the stores they shop in don't have plus sizes. At school, I am often the last one picked in PE."

Zoe Callahan, a talented basketball player, wrote about trying to play ball while struggling to breathe.

Her coach "came up with the idea that I just stay back at our basket so I wouldn't have to run up and down," she wrote. "The stretch marks on my body are the worst. Kids ask what they are, and I feel so embarrass[ed]."

Brittaney, on the other hand, leads a decidedly un-athletic life in Camp Springs, where she lives with her mother, grandmother and uncle in a modest, split-level brick home. She spends most of her time doing homework, watching TV or playing on the computer. Her elementary school offered PE weekly last year.

"I am not a sports person," she said.

Besides, her mom, Gail Scott, is nervous about her playing outside, particularly after her car windshield was broken by a BB gun a few months ago.

Weekends mean family time, which can include a trip to the mall and a stop at McDonald's, where Brittaney's favorite meal used to be a cheeseburger, french fries, 10-piece Chicken McNuggets and a Coke. Grandmother Dolores Henderson is a country cook who makes weekend feasts of eggs, sausage, bacon and grits. They are the perfect grits. "Not runny, creamy," Gail Scott said.

And then there is Movie Night.

One night a week, Scott -- who works as a fraud investigator for Alexandria's Department of Human Services and part time at a liquor store -- brings home the latest DVDs for the family to watch while feasting on pizza or popcorn. When the DVD goes in, Scott joked, "the feed bag comes *on*."

Last year, Scott, 46, became concerned with Brittaney's labored breathing and took her to the doctor, who put her on an eating plan.

Then her Movie Night was changed.

As Brittaney tells it, she sat and watched as her family cooked up a batch of fresh popcorn and slathered it with butter.

"And I'm looking at a bowl of yogurt," she recounted, still indignant. "A couple of days after that my uncle brought me a doughnut. A Krispy Kreme. It was still warm."

That's how her first-ever binge began.

"I was eating and eating, even though I wasn't hungry," she said. "I couldn't control it."

Resenting His Weight

The Yuhasz children said they never saw their father binge-eat.

"I think he was a secret eater, to be honest," said his son Louis, a South Carolina resident and staffing company owner. Yuhasz ate normally in front of his family but was known to sneak off to the Dixie Pig barbecue restaurant on his breaks from work for an extra sandwich or two. He also loved sweets -- pies, cakes, pastries, his mother's homemade rugelach.

He suffered from diabetes and thyroid problems. Stress from working at the impound lot and a second job as a gas station clerk took a toll.

His children said they occasionally resented his weight.

"There were times when I was angry," Louis acknowledged. "There were some things he couldn't do: Cub Scouts, the soap box derby. He would go to Suzzy's soccer games and watch from the car."

The anger only deepened when Big Louie suffered his stroke, and the family members found themselves not only having to deal with a chronically ill parent, but one whose weight complicated his care.

When Big Louie died of a second stroke five months later, his son, who had quit his job to oversee his father's care, fell into a deep depression. He attended to the final details. He had to buy an extra cemetery plot to fit the outsize coffin. Then he couldn't bring himself to get out of bed.

About three months later, he saw a woman being interviewed on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" who also had had a family member die and had decided to honor her by supporting a summer camp in her name.

"That evening, I logged on to the computer and did a word search for fat camps," Yuhasz said.

In 2002, Yuhasz and his siblings raised the money themselves and, working through the city of Alexandria, helped send three children of city employees to weight-loss camp. They sent three more children last year and seven this year, opening the application process to other needy youngsters.

"We thought it was a great way to honor Daddy and honor those kids who feel like -- how do you say it? -- like they're an outcast, like there is nobody like them and they're the fattest people in the world. We want them to know . . . there are kids out there like you," said Rosemarie Yuhasz, the only sibling in the family to battle weight problems over the years.

Resisting the Keys to Success

A pedometer, a calorie counter and a journal: three keys to success for every camper, Wellspring counselors said. The pedometer tracks a camper's steps -- 10,000 a day, or four miles, is the minimum. The journal is for recording fat grams consumed, less than 20 a day, and calories, a maximum of 1,200 to 2,000 daily.

"Journaling should be the number one thing. It should be the focus," said Daniel S. Kirschenbaum, the camp's medical director. "This isn't easy. This is a major lifestyle change for them."

But the whole business nearly did Brittany in.

Her journaling was lackadaisical at best, her attitude glum.

"I was fussin'. I was complaining," Brittany acknowledged later. She seemed not to grasp the concept of tracking 20 fat grams a day -- "20 pounds, 2 percent, it doesn't matter," she said -- and thus missed out on such treats as low-fat s'mores and frozen-yogurt root-beer floats that other campers got to reward complete journals and good attitudes.

After about three weeks, however, Brittany engaged. Aided by a camp clinician, she began diligently recording her food and exercising more, putting a positive face on camp life. Her hard work paid off. On the last night of camp, in front of a crackling campfire, she finally got a "hunter" bead to wear on a leather string around her neck, signifying that she was no longer a camp plebe.

"Yessssss!" she cried, letting out a big whoop. Her campmates cheered.

Earlier that day, at the mess hall that campers dubbed "the Cosmic Muffin," Brittany climbed onto the scale. Her weight loss: 16 pounds.

"She looks wonderful," said her mother, who arrived from Camp Springs with Brittany's grandmother to bring her home. But first she would attend a parents' seminar on camp fundamentals.

After all her homesickness, Brittaney didn't want to leave, shuffling up the hill with her shoelaces dragging. "We'll miss bowling and the movie!" she said.

Before she left, Brittaney hugged her counselor, who handed her a little ceramic bowl decorated with the words "Yum Yum" to measure her snacks when she got home. She hugged Zoe Callahan, who had lost 15 pounds. The other local camper, Tia Norris-Towler, had lost 17 pounds.

"We're outta here," Scott said, but not before she and Henderson considered some of the challenges that the slimming Brittaney would face in Camp Springs, where the fridge traditionally hadn't been stocked with carrot sticks and skim milk. For instance, they realized that two homemade cheesecakes were in the freezer -- one Oreo, one strawberry-kiwi.

Henderson hoped they would be eaten by the time they got home. "Brittaney loves cheesecake," she said.

Home can be a camper's undoing.

"When they come home, they're in a more liberal environment, more freedom to choose their own foods," said pediatrician Susan Nunez, who estimates that most of her patients who attend weight-loss camp eventually gain back at least some of the weight. Plus, the hikes, mountain bike trips and rock climbing that are staples of camp life are "not duplicated at home," she said.

But Yuhasz said he believes the lessons Louie's Kids learn at camp will make a permanent impression, even if the campers are not perfect when they get home.

His goals for Brittaney and the other youngsters were small.

"Maybe a kid will pass on the supersize order of fries and have a single order. That's all I hope for," he said.

Yet he said he dreams of expanding the program nationwide and garnering corporate sponsors, including some big-name fast-food franchises, or having his own nonprofit camp.

"What it's all about is that these kids don't travel down the road my dad did. We can affect one kid at a time," Yuhasz said. "It may take 10, 20 years for some kid to draw on their experiences of this summer to change their life."

A week after Brittaney returned from camp, she, her mother and cousin, Guyrin Henderson, 14, a high school sophomore, sat in Scott's bedroom for their first fat-free Movie Night.

Since she came home, Brittaney had been walking every day and was up to a fast two miles, her mom said proudly. She'd been measuring snacks in her four-ounce snack bowl. But the food journal was suffering.

"I don't want to do it when I'm home. It's too much to handle. I have to get ready for school," Brittaney said.

Her mother rolled her eyes.

During the movie, Brittaney had fat-free fruit snacks, a low-fat gingersnap and a cup of skim milk. Grant and Henderson don't eat anything. "When she went on a diet, the whole family went on a diet," Henderson said. "Salads and celeries."

They survived their first Movie Night.

"I tell Brittaney the only way she's going to get a body beautiful is if she exercises," Scott said. "If a child is not motivated or does not have that drive, it's got to come from the parent. You become the archenemy and not liked sometimes. . . . But we're going to do this whether we like it or not."

Brittaney yawned. She looked up at her mother. She said her goals for the next 12 months are "eat healthy, lose more weight and get good grades," but right now, she said, she seems uncertain how she'll get there.

"The only reason why I'm doing it is because you're pushing me," she said to her mom.