

## Why putting off gap year was well worth the weight

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IT cost £4500 – £125 for every pound of flesh she managed to shed. When 19-year-old Kirsty Powell headed out to New York in the summer to spend eight weeks at a "fat camp", she was hoping to return to Edinburgh a fraction of her former self.

And the combined programme of eating, gentle exercise and psychological support saw her lose 2st 8lbs while in the States – and another 9lbs since.

Today, 5ft 3in Kirsty tips the scales at 12st 1lb – although she is still 24lbs short of her 10st 5lbs target weight. So does she feel the rather hefty price tag for the American weight-loss camp has been worth it?

"I feel fantastic," she says, showing off her new size 12 figure. "I realise £4500 is a lot of money to spend, but it's changed my life."

Perhaps just as well – as Kirsty turned down the chance of a free gap year jaunt, financed by her parents, in order to fight the flab.

"It was an easy decision to make," says Kirsty, 19. "I'd struggled with my weight for the past few years. I'd tried diets, Weightwatchers, Atkins – all that kind of thing. I'd lose a few pounds, then put it back on. When my parents asked me if I wanted to go travelling between leaving school and starting university, they thought I might go across Europe. So when I said 'no, I want to go to fat camp', they were rather taken aback."

In fact, Edinburgh University student Kirsty, of the Cowgate, had already researched the place she wanted to go – the "girls only" Camp Wellspring in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State.

There she hoped to shed some of the extra pounds that had crept on in the past four years – the result of a bout of illness – pushing her weight up to a hefty 15st 5lbs.

And while simply eating less and exercising more might have been a far cheaper option, Kirsty insists the £4500 price tag has been money well spent, changing her life in many ways. "For a start, I've even changed my university course from history to health psychology because I now realise that I want to work with people with weight and food issues," she says.

"Besides," she adds, "how many people spend thousands of pounds over the years for diet products and slimming clubs, but never actually lose weight?" She headed to fat camp specialists Wellspring's New York camp in mid-June for an eight-week programme of healthy eating, gentle exercise and crucial psychological support to help her identify the reasons behind her weight gain. By the end of the first week alone, she had lost 12lbs.

"After that I was losing it at around three to five pounds a week," she smiles. "And when I came home I kept on losing weight. It's been a brilliant experience."

While her parents, who live in Lancashire, tot up the cost of their daughter's diet, it seems they are far from the only ones funding their children's weight loss. For a new generation of young slimmers are increasingly shunning traditional diet methods in favour of US-style "fat camps".

Wellspring UK runs a string of weight-loss camps at its 400-acre Lake District base – and demand has never been higher. "The last three years have helped hundreds of teens lose weight and change their lives forever," says Deb Sweeney Whitmore, executive director of Wellspring Camps. Campers like Kirsty come because our average camper loses 4.3 lbs per week, and 70 per cent maintain or continue losing weight."

A similar format to the Wellspring camps arrived in Edinburgh earlier this year, when a week-long pilot project combining exercise, healthy eating and psychological support from experts was launched by Excel Sports Academy. The October camp at St George's School was aimed at helping obese children using techniques adopted by Olympic medal-winning athletes.

And it's expected the camp format will return to Edinburgh in the future. For with shocking recent figures showing more than a fifth of primary one children in Scotland are overweight, including 8.5 per cent who are obese and 4.3 per cent who are severely obese, demand is likely to grow along with waistbands. Kirsty, who is supporting a new British Heart Foundation campaign aimed at highlighting the dangers of obesity among young people, knows how those overweight youngsters feel.

And she knows how hard it is to lose the weight once it's crept on.

"I actually didn't have a weight problem until four years ago," she explains. "I was 15 and didn't feel well, but it kept being put down to different things like viruses or glandular fever.

"Then when I was 17 I was diagnosed as having ME."

The condition, Myalgic encephalomyelitis, is also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

As a result of the disease, Kirsty found herself spending long periods of time indoors, unable to exercise and with nothing to do but comfort eat. "I suffered from the psychological side of ME, I wasn't able to go out with my friends and I was very down. The weight went on and that would make me feel worse.

"Because I couldn't exercise, the weight piled on."

The gap year offer from her parents was, she recalls, the perfect chance to change her habits.

"I got there expecting it to be like some kind of boot camp. In fact it wasn't like that at all. It was more about the psychology of being overweight – you discover a lot of people are overweight not because they are greedy but because there's a psychological reason. It's really not as simple as just exercising and cutting down on what you eat."

And she's determined her fat camp lesson will help her continue to lose weight.

"Apart from everything else I'm enjoying what I eat much more," she says. "I'd actually forgotten what food is supposed to taste like – I was so used to having everything drenched in so much fat.

"Now I eat masses of fruit and vegetables, Quorn instead of meat and my favourite dessert is a banana grilled and smothered with fat-free chocolate sauce."

As for the £4500 price tag, she believes it's been worth every penny of her parents' money.

"It's changed my life forever," she grins. "And that's something money can't usually buy."

## **ONLINE GAME SHOWS EFFECTS OF A POOR DIET**

IT'S among one of the most worrying of childhood trends. For a generation of young people face growing up with a wealth of health problems linked to their ever-expanding waistbands.

It is estimated a million UK children will be obese by 2012. Currently a third of children at the age of 12 are overweight, including almost 20 per cent who are obese. And it's a trend that is expected to worsen.

Yet, according to the British Heart Foundation Scotland, almost three quarters of Scottish youngsters are unaware of the devastating effects eating junk food can have. Nearly half of all eight to 15-year-olds thought the most dangerous side effects of eating junk food were to make them put on weight, cause their teeth to rot or give them spots.

And few understood that piling on the pounds could have a massive impact on their life expectancy.

To help highlight the dangers, the heart charity has unveiled its new online game – the Yoobot – which

allows children to play with their future, helping them understand the long-term effects of a poor diet.

Users create their own Yoobot – a mini version of themselves – and control its diet and exercise, sometimes with surprising results.

BHF Scotland's prevention and care adviser, Andy Carver, says: "Today's junk food generation can't see beyond the burger box.

The clock is ticking on the obesity time bomb and it is now more important than ever for children to be educated to take control of their diets."