



Campers lose weight on summer break

By Christie Campbell

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Nick Melocchi knows exactly what he would have been doing the past six weeks if he had been at home.

"Sitting around, playing video games," the 12-year-old from West Newton admitted, speaking Friday from the gymnasium at Washington & Jefferson College.

Melocchi was taking a break from soccer, Wiffle ball and basketball he and others were playing as part of the Wellspring Wellness Camp activities.

Students ages 11 to 18 pay between \$6,000 and \$9,000 to attend four-, six- or eight-week camp sessions to eat a low-fat diet, play sports and learn alternatives to behaviors and habits that put on the pounds.

For Melocchi, that has translated into a 31-pound weight loss. And, he doesn't miss the video games. "You have no time to play them," he said of the camp.

That's part of the goal of Wellspring - to keep kids active who would otherwise be sedentary. And, in a world where fattening food is so readily available, to teach them how to read nutrition labels and cook low fat alternatives such as baked-chicken nuggets and French fries.

It's a problem that not only affects the United States but is becoming a worldwide epidemic. According to Jane Morrison, camp director, in 2015 almost half of the U.S. population will be classified as overweight and obese. Today, obesity is on the rise even in countries such as China, India and Australia.

Accompanying weight issues are health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and sleep apnea and emotional factors including depression and low self-esteem.

There are three basic components to the camp, explained clinical director Heather Frank: Eat a low-fat diet, aim for walking 10,000 steps a day and self-monitoring which includes writing in a daily journal. That not only includes reporting everything that goes into your mouth but your thoughts and feelings as well.

What makes Wellspring different from traditional summer "fat camps" is its after-care program, said John Gordon, marketing director. Getting parents involved is a critical component of the program. After students leave camp, they remain connected by computer with their behavioral coach, and the company does six-month and 12-month follow-ups. As a result, 70 percent of the students maintain their weight loss or continue to lose after leaving camp, said Gordon.

Forty kids have attended W&J's Wellspring camp, the first camp the company has held in Pennsylvania. In addition to 14 camps, Wellspring operates two boarding schools which help remove students from unhealthy environments in order to focus on better eating habits.

That was the case for Juel Kuckenmeister of Carson City, Nev. She spent a year at a Wellspring boarding school in California where she lost 135 pounds. Now a counselor at the W&J camp, Kuckenmeister is able to relate to the campers and how they feel. On her way to the dining hall Friday she noticed how much faster the students were walking compared to their first week of camp.

One of those bouncing along with his friends was Tyler Kison of Butler, scheduled to leave last night after six weeks during which his clothes size dropped from a 40 to a 36.

"I've learned I can do anything if I push myself," he said.