

Our Opinion: Scott Basso's courageous shared struggle

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The first two episodes of "Too Fat for 15: Fighting Back" air back to back at 11 a.m. and noon today on Style Network (Channel 65 on Comcast cable). The show airs every day, several times a day on most days. Check www.mystyle.com for a complete schedule.

We're so inundated with data about America's obesity problem that it's easy to view things in the abstract. More than one in four Americans is obese, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Diabetes and obesity-related illness is the biggest contributor to our rising health care costs.

A report last year by Trust for America's Health ranked Illinois 10th in the nation in childhood obesity, with 34.9 percent of children here classified as obese.

Those statistics may frame the problem, but they only tell the numerical side of the story. The real story of the problems obesity can cause can come only from going through the struggle yourself or watching someone close to you fight that battle.

That's why we give a lot of credit to 14-year-old **Scott Basso**. The Athens High School freshman-to-be has struggled mightily with his weight for much of his life. For the next two months, he shares his battle against obesity with viewers of "Too Fat for 15: Fighting Back," a documentary-style show that began airing last week on Style Network.



The series follows five teenagers who are enrolled at Wellspring Academy in Brevard, N.C. The facility, one of two academies Wellspring operates in the United States, immerses its students in a program rooted in making changes in diet and exercise. Viewers see Scott and the other teens learning to eat healthy and incorporate exercise into their daily lives. (They are given pedometers so they can meet a daily goal of 10,000 steps, which is five miles.)

More importantly, though, viewers hear from the teens themselves about how their weight has adversely affected their lives physically and, especially, emotionally.

One especially poignant scene from the series debut last week catches Scott breaking down in tears.

"I really need to turn my life around and I'm ready," Scott says, fighting back tears. "I just, I want this so bad."

Though technically a reality show, "Too Fat for 15" really is better described as a documentary series. There is ample emotion throughout the show, but it is not cheaply exploited as is in so many reality series.

The tone is serious and respectful of the teenage subjects, and the show contains many helpful hints for adjusting one's daily life to lose weight.

Obviously, not every seriously obese teenager in America can go to an expensive place like Wellspring, which costs \$6,250 a month, to conquer their weight problem. Scott's time there has been a community effort, as the Bassos' church and friends have chipped in to help.

Scott's parents are hopeful that their insurance will help cover some \$3,000 in outstanding bills. Obesity is one of the critical health challenges facing our nation. Insurers play a key role in making weight loss programs accessible to those who truly have the determination to make their lives better and healthier.

But those who can't go through such a rigorous program and are sharing a struggle with weight and the attendant self-esteem issues surely can find inspiration in Scott's story.

It takes courage to share a struggle as personal and emotional as this even with close relatives and friends. For a teenager to share it with a television audience is especially courageous.

Way to go, Scott.