

Fat Camp Offers Youngsters Chance to Feel Normal

By MATT SEDENSKY, August 11, 2009 (AP)

The campers here monitor how many steps they take and how many calories they ingest, aim to eat zero fat, watch no television and rise each morning around 6. They have seen their families once at most this summer, are limited in their phone and Internet use, and put through hours and hours of activity each day.

But, for once, it feels so good to be normal.

For overweight teens and preteens, weight-loss camps like Wellsprings Florida are more than just a chance to transform their bodies. They rebuild self-confidence, escape the relentless teasing of skinny classmates, participate in sports they were too ashamed to try and get a glimpse of the youth they've always wanted.

"A lot of them are used to being the social outcast," said Ian Taylor, the 27-year-old camp director. "They have their little group of friends, but they're generally not accepted."

But not here.

Before the clock strikes 7 a.m., campers are already gathering in a circle to stretch. They'll take an

hourlong walk through the quiet neighborhood around the Admiral Farragut Academy, the military boarding school where the camp is based. And in the middle of the pack is Melenda Campbell, a 16-year-old from Jensen Beach, Fla., who dropped 28 pounds to 212 pounds in her first six weeks. She is 5-foot-4.



Cayla Giaimo, left, and Melenda Campbell, right, working out with instructor Jenn Hall, center, during an aerobics class at Wellsprings Florida, a weight-loss camp in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Campbell has struggled with weight her whole life. As a 4-year-old, she remembers being caught hiding behind a couch with a can of cake frosting. Her mom suggested the camp (which costs \$9,190 for eight weeks) and she enthusiastically said yes. She's lost more weight than ever before, run her first mile (then two miles), and says she's been struck by how positive and motivating other campers have been.

"I wouldn't want to come here with half the kids at my high school, because they'd just murder you," said Campbell, wearing light blue heart-adorned sunglasses nearly the same color as the eyes they mask. "There are some times when I feel like I like it so much that I feel like I don't want to leave."

After the walk, Campbell has breakfast (French toast with sugar-free syrup, vanilla yogurt, a banana and Diet Coke) and then joins a group going on a three-hour bike ride. Ronen Ostro, at 18 the oldest camper here, is among those opting for a marathon of other activities instead of biking. Like nearly everyone else here, weight has always been an issue.

In second grade, he was already 120 pounds; by eighth grade, he was 216. He was about 343 when he arrived at Wellspring from his home in Lincolnwood, Ill. By the sixth week, he had shed 45 pounds to weigh in at 298.



Instructor Jenn Hall, center, facing camera, teaching an aerobics class at Wellsprings Florida, a weight-loss camp in St. Petersburg, Fla.

He was tired of not getting picked for three-on-three basketball games, of getting picked last in gym class, and of passing up biking with friends along Lake Shore Drive in Chicago because he'd get out of breath. He wanted to get on the right track before starting college later this month.

"This is my last chance to really change," he said.

It is floor hockey first for Ostro, then a weight-training circuit, volleyball, dodgeball and an aerobic circuit, all before lunch. He won't hesitate to take off his black Phat Farm shirt later at the pool, or to offer tips to a camper having trouble with serving a volleyball. For the first time, he feels like a leader.

"The kids here look up to me," he said. "It's much easier to be more comfortable with yourself here."

By now, many campers from earlier in the summer have already departed, and even with recent additions, only 15 remain. Besides the physical activities, they attend group and private counseling sessions and cooking and nutrition classes. Campers vary wildly in sizes and those with less to lose are seen as examples of what could be for those who are heavier.

"People say, 'I would do anything to be 147,'" said Lindy Magiera, a 14-year-old from Jacksonville who lost 24 pounds in her first six weeks. She shaved the time it takes her to run a mile from 13:35 to 9:30, wants to try out for her high school soccer team and is already planning to work out with a friend at home.

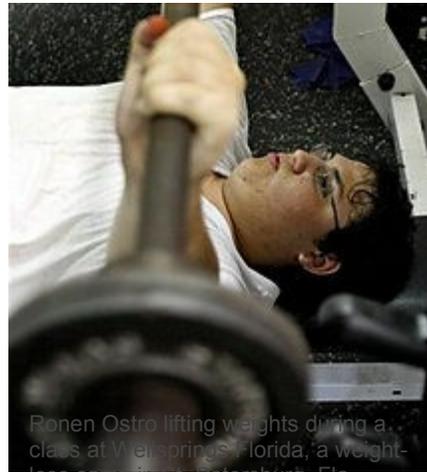
Still, over lunch, she worries about what it will be like returning to the real world.

"Everyone at home, they kind of just eat whatever they want," she said.

As the day wears on, Wellspring campers attend group therapy ("What happens in group, stays in group," the counselor tells them) and swim. Tonight, campers will gather for a weekly ritual, where campers are elevated to new levels, which come with field trips and additional phone and Internet privileges. But first, dinner.

Cayla Giaimo, a 12-year-old from DeLand, laments how mean classmates were at home. They'd shout "earthquake" when she ran, even as she tried a litany of diets to lose weight. She dropped about 24 pounds in her first six weeks, to 136 pounds on her 5-foot-1 frame, and is eager to lose more.

"All my friends at home are way skinnier than me, and here everyone's my size," she said over chicken stir fry. "I wish they knew how hard it is. They can just go out and eat an ice cream whenever they want and not gain a pound."



Giaino liked Wellspring so much she extended her six-week stay to eight weeks. She can't keep from smiling widely as she talks, her blue eyes glistening above sun-kissed cheeks.

After dinner, the campers gather around the pool. A counselor ticks off statistics on the hundreds of pounds lost and the millions of steps taken as the kids dangle their feet in the warm water.

Campbell, Giaino and Ostro are all invited to take their place atop blue plastic diving blocks. They are being elevated to "kahuna," the highest level at Wellspring. And one by one, each shares their story.

"I was different from everyone else: I was the fat kid," Campbell said. "I knew that something had to be done," said Giaino. "The teasing was unbearable," added Ostro.

The campers earn a charm to mark their achievement. They choose counselors who are forced, clothes on, into the pool. And then, they walk back to the dorms, across the palm-dotted campus, singing, smiling and finally feeling normal.