

Dealing with a heavy burden

After diets and camps fail, desperate families turn to the Academy of the Sierras, a boarding school for obese kids that has a rigorous academic program.

By Tracy Correa
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REEDLEY — Terry Henry was 560 pounds when his family decided to send him to a rural boarding school to help him lose weight.

The 16-year-old's grandparents are footing the \$5,500 monthly tuition because his parents cannot afford it. They're paying for him to live for 18 months at the school, about 3,000 miles from his home in Exeter, N.H.

For desperate families such as Terry's, the Academy of the Sierras is a last resort.

The school's 17 students, from as far as Florida and Ecuador, are here for one reason: They are overweight, and their families don't know what to do. After diets failed and summer weight-loss camps provided only temporary solutions, the year-round school offers a glimmer of hope.

About 25 miles southeast of Fresno, the school is said to be the nation's first boarding school for obese students. The for-profit school, nestled on 65 acres near the Kings River, opened in September.

The 30-member staff teaches students to replace poor eating habits and sedentary lifestyles with good nutrition and physical activity.

Students, ages 12 to 20, eat healthy meals and exercise regularly, all under close supervision. College preparatory classes are part of the rigorous academic program.

Some students come from well-to-do families, while others, such as Terry's, have to scrape together tuition from relatives.

Ryan Craig, the academy's executive director, says the school is for those with significant weight problems: "We don't have anyone here less than 80 pounds overweight." The school requirement is at least 30 pounds overweight.

The cost is out of reach for many families. The academy has no students from the surrounding



Personal trainer Jon Peterson, right, guides 16-year-old Terry Henry as he lifts weights in the gym at the Academy of the Sierras, a year-round weight-loss school in Reedley. Terry, who weighed 560 pounds when he enrolled at the school, has lost about 100 pounds. John Walker / The Fresno Bee

central San Joaquin Valley, even though the region's childhood obesity rate exceeds the statewide average of 26.5%.

Craig says the school is trying to help families tap into financial aid and has gotten some health insurers to cover the counseling portion of the program.

The school is a first for Healthy Living Academies, a division of Aspen Education Group, which runs summer weight-loss camps. Aspen has been in existence since the 1980s and operates 28 residential and outdoor programs in 11 states, most of them schools for troubled children.

The company bought the Reedley property — once owned by Kings View Mental Health System — almost two years ago and opened a school for emotionally disturbed children. The school had only a small number of students when the company switched gears, deciding the campus was the perfect site for a weight-loss boarding school.

If the academy is successful, the Cerritos-based company plans to operate more weight-loss schools nationwide.

Craig says he's convinced the concept will work. Enrollment has more than doubled since the school opened Sept. 7; 70 students are expected within a year. With some additional remodeling, the school could accommodate 130 students.

Most students are encouraged to stay at least a semester — three to four months — but are welcome to stay longer. Students return home occasionally, as most did over the Thanksgiving holiday.

Students such as Terry enter the program with high hopes, having battled weight issues for most of their lives.

"I was born a big baby — 10 pounds, 6 ounces," says the dark-haired teenager whose face bears multiple piercings.

He is one of the largest at the academy, where students weigh from 200 to 600 pounds. He says there is a certain comfort and camaraderie in being with students who share the same struggle.

Structured days

The daily routine at the academy begins with a 2-mile walk at 7 a.m.

Students walk briskly past farmhouses and orchards. They have walked the same path almost daily since September. A few of the heavier students, who have difficulty with long walks because of leg chafing caused by their size, whiz by on bicycles — visual blurs against the serene country backdrop.

After getting showered and dressed, they meet in the cafeteria for breakfast, then head off to classes. Classes end at 3:20 p.m. on weekdays, followed by dinner, more exercise and a 90-minute study hall for homework. Classes include advanced-placement calculus, economics, psychology and statistics.

The strict routine has been difficult for Natasha Ulch.

Natasha, 16, gained most of her weight while growing up in Canada. She has lived in Ecuador, where her father works for an oil company, for the past 4 1/2 years.

She views her stay at the academy as a California adventure, but the academic work has been a challenge, and she has not lost weight as fast as other students. It took her three weeks to lose 5 pounds.

But she has been through tough times before, like when she was at her heaviest and teased mercilessly at school. When she walked down the hall, students would say, “Oh, there’s an earthquake.”

A tough-talking girl with a double-pierced tongue, she usually would fire back with an expletive.

The comments affected her deeply. “I missed a half-year because of it.”

Back in the cafeteria, the big news was the recent addition of bagels to the morning menu, which includes Egg Beaters, turkey bacon, fresh fruit and yogurt.

The academy’s weight-loss program divides foods into “controlled foods” and “uncontrolled foods.” Controlled foods typically include entrées and snacks and are limited.

Students are allowed to eat more uncontrolled foods, including fruit, yogurt and vegetables. The school offers foods that are high in protein and fiber but low in calories and fat. A display board in the cafeteria breaks down the calories, fat and protein of each food so students can track them in a daily log.

There are no vending machines. The only television set is in a workout room, and students are told they must be moving to watch it.

Exercise is a major part of the program, with staff members usually participating and encouraging students. Students wear pedometers and are encouraged to take 10,000 steps a day. There are weekend recreational trips — two national parks are within driving distance.

Jon Peterson, a fitness trainer originally from Clovis, designs a personal workout program for each student. He works with students twice a week for about 50 minutes.

“We start out very slow,” he says. “Most of what they gain the first few weeks is muscle control.”

The workouts are modified for each student.

In many cases, Peterson says, he does not need to add weights to an exercise such as leg lifts: “Lifting their own body supplies the weight.”

Over a recent breakfast, classmates discuss their progress and say Terry is in the lead in terms of pounds lost. They say this without animosity or jealousy, insisting they support and cheer on one another at the weekly weigh-ins.

Even so, 17-year-old Daniel Burger of Mesa, Ariz., looks enviously toward Terry. “We all know who has lost the most. It’s not a contest, but everybody knows,” he says.

Terry ducks his head and tries to appear unaffected, but he is unable to suppress a smile.

His weight loss has come quickly. He lost 19 pounds in his first week at the school. In all, he’s lost 100.2 pounds.

Living with obesity has not been easy for him. He knows he stands out.

Wearing a T-shirt with the words “Big Daddy,” Terry says he is used to stares, although he’s not sure whether it’s his piercings or his weight that attract attention. “People can’t get past the looks on the outside.”

Obesity epidemic

There is no shortage of students who could qualify for the school. Obesity rates for children continue to rise nationwide.

Since the early 1970s, the percentage of American children and adolescents defined as overweight has more than doubled to about 16%, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

More children suffer from obesity’s side effects, including type 2 diabetes — once referred to as adult-onset diabetes.

Three out of four overweight teens remain heavy into adulthood, when health problems can worsen.

About \$117 billion a year is spent treating obesity-related ailments such as diabetes and heart disease. Obesity is the nation’s second-leading killer, behind tobacco.

None of this is lost on those who work at the academy, where the goal is to teach students to take control of their lives.

The school employs a staff aimed at steering students back to a healthy weight. Daniel Kirschenbaum, a professor at Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago, serves as clinical director. He has developed successful weight-loss programs for hospitals and is the author of “The 9 Truths About Weight Loss,” a book aimed at providing a manageable program for controlling weight.

The school also aims to get students back on track academically. Many of the academy’s students have been exposed to so much ridicule from classmates that they have dropped out of school.

Studies have shown a correlation between nutrition and how well students perform in school.

A report released in September by the national nonprofit organization Action for Healthy Kids shows that poor nutrition, inactivity and weight problems impair student achievement and cost school districts money from lost attendance.

Bill Potts-Datema, chairman of Action for Healthy Kids and director of Partnerships for Children’s Health at the Harvard School of Public Health, says because obese students often face both health and academic challenges, there is a need for schools like the Academy of the Sierras.

“Kids have to be healthy to know how to learn, but they have to learn how to be healthy,” he says.

Potts-Datema says obese students face obstacles most other children don’t: “Students who are overweight are missing more school. They oftentimes are dealing with health issues that kids at a normal weight don’t.”

Mal Mahedy, 16, of Naples, Fla., says she had a difficult time in traditional school.

It was torture, says Mal, her brownish-blond hair pinned in a ponytail. “I’ve been called every name in the book.” The cruelty went beyond name-calling when students played a practical joke on

her — they Super-Glued the lock to her locker so she could not open it. She's convinced her appearance made her a target for the prank.

Her self-esteem crumbled, school absences increased, and her grades plummeted. She didn't want to go to school, and her family resorted to a private home tutor.

"My weight has affected my life severely," Mal says. "I didn't want to leave the house. ... I don't have self-esteem. I want to have self-esteem."

Mal is more upbeat at the academy, which she likes better than the weight-loss summer camps she has attended: "I've learned more in 11/2 weeks than five summers in weight-loss camps."

Overweight since she was 10, she has lost 64 pounds at the academy.

Life after school

Fresno doctor Gary Matson, a family practitioner who devotes half of his practice to treating obesity, likes the fact that the school is helping obese adolescents, but he worries about their being away from family. He also wonders what happens when students return home.

"It sounds like they have the right mix," he says. "But the only way we can do this is to make it routine."

Matson is particularly troubled by the increasing toll that obesity takes on younger children. In his practice, "we had a 13-year-old with elevated cholesterol and signs of early diabetes. This child was more than 300 pounds."

Treating obesity is complex, he says. It's about genetics, family eating habits and environment.

Academy officials say they are not teaching the kids to diet; they are teaching them to eat healthy and incorporate exercise into their lives.

"It's based on science, not fad," says Molly Carmel, the school's live-in therapist who struggled with her weight as a teen.

Therapy is a critical part of the program. Studies have suggested that the obese are five times more likely to suffer from depression.

Carmel meets with each student twice a week — in a group and one-on-one. She goes over food logs with students and encourages them to talk about problems and emotions that might hinder success.

"We talk about what is different this time," she says.

"This time" resonates with most of the students. Many are alumni of weight-loss summer camps, where parents send them away for six to eight weeks to lose weight. Students say they lost weight at camp, only to regain it when they returned home.

David Ginsburg, assistant chief of the cancer prevention and nutrition division at the California Department of Health Services, says schools such as the Academy of the Sierras should be considered in more communities. However, he worries that the program is out of reach for low-income families.

The academy's \$5,500 monthly tuition is on the high end for therapeutic boarding schools — live-in

schools that offer clinical counseling — according to the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs. Therapeutic boarding schools cost about \$3,700 to \$5,500 a month, according to the association.

Most of the association's 129 member schools deal with emotionally disturbed children. The Academy of the Sierras is the association's only school specializing in obese children.

Ginsburg also worries that the program's teachings won't stick when students leave the campus.

Getting a handle on childhood obesity is not simple, he says. "Many of the reports that are coming out are talking about a multipronged approach. You are looking at school, community, industry and media."

He said parents are part of the equation.

School officials say they realize students could slip into old habits when they return to their families. Some did when they went home for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Craig says most students lost weight after spending a few days at home for the holiday, but some others gained.

School officials say they will work on reinforcement in hopes that the tools they provide follow students home. A six-month follow-up plan will allow school officials to keep in contact with students and their families by phone and e-mail.

Executive Director Craig says he knows it will be difficult for students to keep off the weight.

"They will never be like you and me," he says, explaining their lifelong struggle.

Matson, the Fresno weight management doctor, says his biggest concern is that students won't be able to keep up with the program once they return home.

"I worry who is going to get up and take that 2-mile walk with them."

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