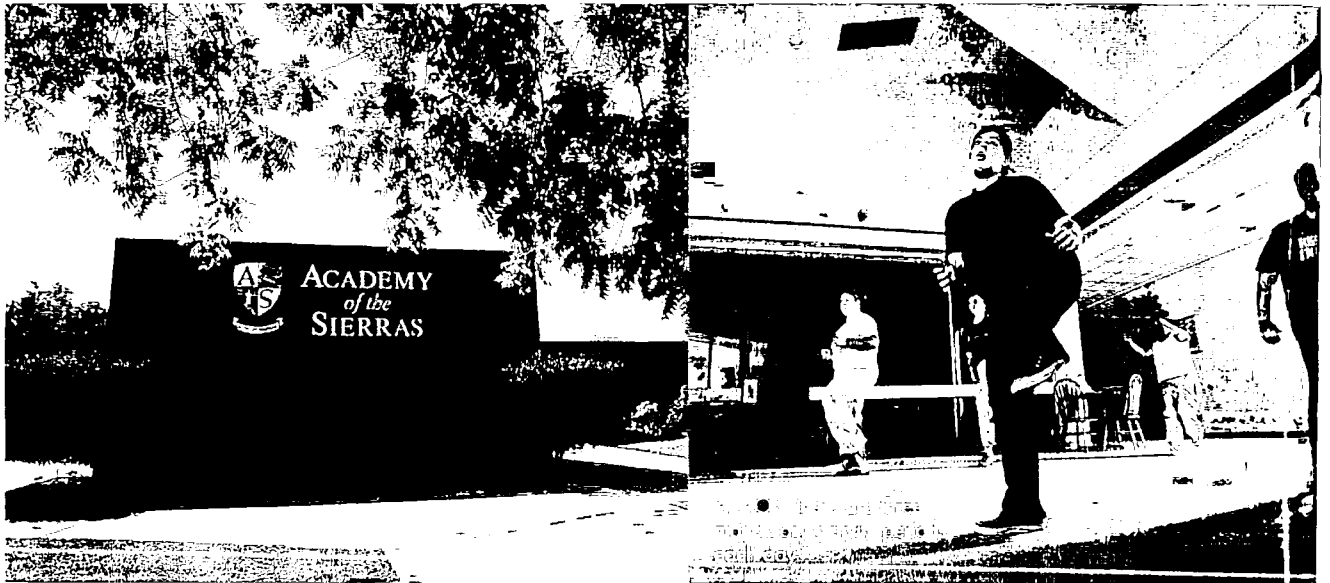


WELCOME TO FAT SCHOOL

What's it like to be a student at the world's first boarding school for obese teens? **Audrey D. Brashich** investigates.

There are lots of fat jokes at Academy of the Sierras (AOS). From the minute I arrive on the 1960s-style campus in Reedley, California, I hear students tease each other with comments like "You've got more rolls than a bakery!" As kids do cannonball jumps into the swimming pool to make the biggest splash possible, they yell, "Watch out! Fat person coming in!" Generally, no one gets offended because everyone here

she says. "I realized I was bigger, and then it just got worse." Lisa says that back home, she stopped wearing T-shirts and shorts because her father used to make comments about her size. "He's working on that," she says. Her mom suggested AOS, and after a couple weeks of adjustment, Lisa started to like it. Here, she's learning to let down her guard. After dropping over 30 pounds in three months, Lisa's feeling comfortable enough to wear



knows what it's like to be large in a world where thinness symbolizes beauty and success.

All of the 55 students arrived at the school clinically obese, which means they have a body mass index (BMI) greater than that of 95 percent of people of the same age and gender. Their parents are discovering the school online, and some students are starting to get referrals from pediatricians who have found out about the program, according to Ryan Craig, the school's executive director.

"There's no such thing as a 'pretty fat girl'" I talk to Lisa*, 17, a smart brunette whose heaviest weight was over 300 pounds. "In 5th grade, I noticed that I couldn't flip over the bars like all the skinny kids could,"

tank tops and a bathing suit (she's in a T-shirt and jeans now), yet she still can't quite feel good about her body. "I've been called ugly for so long that it's just in your brain and then you finally believe it," she says glumly. "There's this one girl who has dropped a lot of weight, and I think she is so pretty, but she doesn't think so. There's no such thing as a 'pretty fat girl.' I feel pretty, but I know I am not...even though I am. Y'know?"

Still, groups of "the pretty girls and the cute boys" exist at AOS just like at any other high school, according to Lisa. "All the [lunch] tables have cliques," she says.

Lisa hasn't told her old friends where she is. "I didn't want anyone to know that I was so out of control that I had to go to a boarding school for overweight kids," she

*Names and identifying details have been changed.

PHOTOS: TOMAS OVALLE

says. "My best friend doesn't even know. I mean, I really want to tell her, but it's embarrassing." Actually, lots of AOS students keep their whereabouts a secret because they're sick of being teased.

"My friends from home think I'm just at a [boarding] school," says Julie*, a 15-year-old who also arrived at 300-plus pounds. "I started struggling with my weight when I was, like, three years old—I've gone to dieticians and personal trainers. It pissed me off that nothing worked for me." Julie is the loud, gregarious queen-bee type, but she admits that she always tried to be the fun one at home to make up for her weight. "My friends are really slim," she says. "I put on an act, and I seem happy all the time, so they're not very supportive."

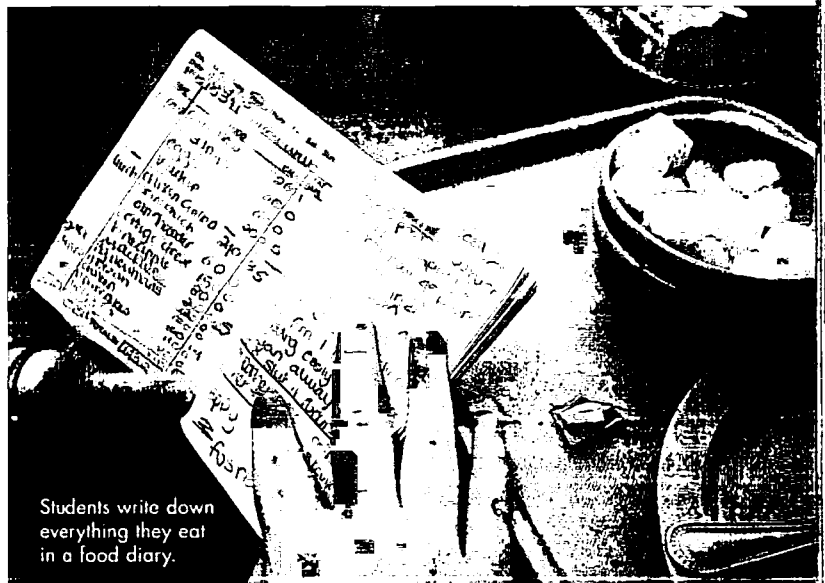
During a free period, I chat with Shannon Willey, a wavy-haired 17-year-old with glasses from Berwyn, Pennsylvania. We're in an empty classroom covered with upbeat motivational posters that proclaim, MY SUCCESS IS UP TO ME and I AM WORTH IT, and her voice trembles as she recounts how a group of guys at her hometown mall heartlessly mocked her because of her body. Just as she whispered to her best friend that she thought the guys

worries that they have two strikes against them: a natural physical tendency toward weight gain and social discrimination. "Our biologies are such that our bodies will resist permanent weight control," she tells me. "And society implies that if you're fat, you're lazy and stupid because losing weight should be easy."

She believes the key to long-term weight control is a combination of healthy eating habits, self-monitoring and effective fitness routines (in other words: eat right and exercise). That's why students at AOS can fill up on "uncontrolled foods" such as salad, fruits and vegetables, but have to make do with single portions of "controlled foods" like chicken teriyaki, breakfast cereal or chocolate pudding. They also record their fat and calorie intake in pocket journals and wear pedometers—small digital monitors that clip onto a belt or waistband—to measure the total number of steps they take daily. While the average American fits in fewer than 5,000, some AOS students are up to about 17,000 steps, which is about eight miles.

The need for this school is obvious. According to the American Obesity Association, 30 percent of teens are over-

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Students write down everything they eat in a food diary.

were really cute, she heard one of them say, "Damn! Look at that fat bitch!" She managed to get past them with her head held high, but then she broke down in tears. "I know I am not the best-looking person, but it really sucks to hear things like that."

"We're not a spa"

I head to the administration wing to discuss student life at AOS with Molly Carmel, 28, the school's deputy clinical director. Her office is filled with obesity research materials—dense medical journals and pamphlets about healthy lifestyles. Although she is fit and hyperenergetic, Molly weighed nearly 350 pounds as an adolescent. That's why she considers helping overweight teens a personal mission, but

weight and nearly 16 percent are obese. A 2004 study of 15 countries, including France, Germany, Ireland, Greece and Sweden, revealed that the U.S. has the highest percentage of fat teens. But anyone who isn't ready to commit to the AOS program is refused admission—as are those who aren't overweight enough. "We're not for girls who are trying to get in shape for their upcoming proms or graduations," Ryan tells me while outlining the school's approach of behavioral therapy combined with physical activity. "We're not a spa." Ryan explains that most newcomers go through three stages: the Honeymoon, when losing weight seems doable; Frustration, when bingeing and being lazy seem more appealing; and Ownership, when students decide to do what it takes to drop the weight. >

For Jaimie Goeble, 18, a soft-spoken brunette who went from 304 to 213 pounds in seven months, one of the hardest parts was facing her problem with bingeing. "I used to get a large Jamocha shake from Arby's and a burger from McDonald's, then pull into a gas station for chips and candy bars," she says, describing her pre-AOS routine. "And that was just lunch." Now she gets upset when she sees students overindulge on field trips to local restaurants where they're supposed to practice ordering healthy, balanced meals: "The worst is when someone gets ranch dressing. It's like they are saying, 'F you,' to the whole program."

"My goal is a size 14"

I arrive early at the dorm's common room for a kickboxing class, and Christina Aguilera's "Dirrty" is already booming out of the CD player. Molly, who's also a certified aerobics instructor, is pushing furniture out of the way. About ten students tumble in wearing pajama bottoms or sweatpants bearing AOS' motto, MENS ET SALVERE, which roughly means that the development of the mind is part of total

says that at AOS, she's realized that liking food too much *can* be an eating disorder. "I turn off my feelings completely with food," she says. "But here I have to write how much I eat in a journal every day, and I am learning to express my emotions."

Later, at breakfast, I notice lots of students drowning their bran flakes in Splenda and their egg whites in ketchup. I've heard some of them use psychobabble like "self-medicating with food" and "negative attention-seeking behavior" to describe their habits. When I ask students if they get hungry between meals, most say they've gotten used to the portions. Still, in one English class I visit, some students repeatedly mention *gumbo* and *jambalaya* to symbolize how America is a melting pot. In another class, a girl blurts out, "I thought you had a Twinkie in there!" when a classmate rustles papers in her bag. So food doesn't seem far from their minds.

But AOS students have another obsession: clothing. They keep telling me they've "outgrown" their jeans, but what they really mean is that the pants are falling off. "I love this yellow skirt," Jaimie says of the dressy outfit she



Pedometers track the number of steps each student takes per day.

"I'VE BEEN CALLED UGLY FOR SO LONG THAT I BELIEVE IT. THERE'S THIS ONE GIRL WHO HAS DROPPED A LOT OF WEIGHT, AND I THINK SHE IS SO PRETTY, BUT SHE DOESN'T THINK SO. THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A 'PRETTY FAT GIRL.'" —LISA*, 17

health. The class—the first of three mandatory daily activity periods—is low impact, but still a challenge for many participants. Next door in the fitness center—home to the school's only TV—I find a few students watching *The Nanny* as they lift weights or jog on the treadmill. "I used to just lie in bed, watch TV and binge-eat three meals a day," says Jessica*, a 15-year-old blond who says that she lost a few family members around age 12, which is when the bingeing started. I have a hard time envisioning her slacking since she's superenthusiastic and has dropped a lot of weight since she's been at AOS.

"I would tell myself, *I don't have a problem*," says Jessica. "I'm not one of those girls you see on TV who has an eating disorder. Maybe I like food, that's all." But Jessica

put together especially for an excursion to Starbucks later in the evening. (Students who adhere strictly to their diets and exercise programs earn off-campus privileges.) "I'm just so sad it's too big now." In the dorm lounge, a suggestion sheet for cool weekend day trips lists shopping as a top choice, which makes sense since there's lots of talk about buying new cute things when parents visit or after graduation. "My goal is a size 14," Lisa told me when we were in the cafeteria. "I know I can get there with a lot of work. I already went down two pants sizes, which is so exciting."

The guidance and training at AOS come at a price: Current tuition is a whopping \$5,500 per month, although many health insurers cover the counseling ses-

sions with behavioral coaches. That reduces monthly costs to about \$3,500, which still isn't cheap. Some parents are able to foot the bill, but others are taking out crushing educational loans or making personal sacrifices. "We lost our house last year and are now in an apartment," explains Lisa. "My parents want to buy another house, but instead they're spending the money on me." When I ask her if that puts a lot of pressure on her, she reluctantly admits it makes her feel guilty and selfish.

Over the next few years, AOS plans to track alumni success through its online after-care program, which helps students continue to set realistic goals and stay on track. The school hopes to prove to health insurers that its approach is more effective than gastric-bypass surgery (stomach stapling), which is currently covered by many insurance plans. If it can, more of the tuition might be covered in the future.

"This is the first time in a long time somebody has actually really liked me"

"I'd never had much self-confidence, and when I got here so many girls liked me, I had no clue what to do," says

think about all my bad habits. I can't believe I let it get to that point," he says.

At AOS, though, Paul is learning better habits, and his warm personality has attracted attention. "By the third day, I had already been asked about 50 times who I liked," he says. "I kind of panicked." (Statistics were slightly in his favor; AOS is 60 percent girls.) About three weeks later, he started liking Carrie*, 17. "I had to fight for him!" Carrie laughs. Paul effortlessly compliments her—about how great she's looking in photos and how deftly she handles her parents' high expectations—without sounding like he's using some cheesy movie line. And Carrie says that even though they've been together for only a few months, the friendship they share is so deep that it'll probably last forever because of where they met. "I was nervous," admits Carrie demurely as Paul looks at her, smiling. "This is the first time in a long time somebody has actually really liked me. It was good and overwhelming at the same time."

As weird as it sounds, some of the students I meet are so appreciative of what they've learned and the people they've met at AOS, they're almost thankful for being obese. "I

I AM
WORTH
LOVING

AOS aims to build self-confidence, as well as healthy lifestyle.



Paul*, 17, who has dropped a significant amount of weight in his first four months and is hot in a preppy, sailing-club kind of way. We're sitting in the grass in the late-afternoon sun, openly talking about his past insecurities, which is pretty gutsy since guys usually deny having any. "I was always afraid of what everyone thought of me," says Paul. "I'd put myself down. When you don't think highly of yourself, other people don't think highly of you."

"My parents didn't want me to eat too much," says Paul. "I would actually go to fast-food places and hide the food—and then the wrappers after I ate—in my backpack. I'd put the trash in a dumpster the next day." Paul also remembers worrying that his dog would find the wrappers and carry them around the house. "When I

wonder where I would be if I wasn't fat," says Jaimie pensively over a skim iced latte at Starbucks. "I know it's made me a better person. I almost feel lucky." Her perspective seems startlingly mature to me given the ridicule, alienation and prejudice that fat people endure in our society—it can't be easy to attend "fat" school when so much in our culture glorifies ultrathinness.

But students have some ideas about changing societal values. "Where are the obese actors?" asks Robert Klein, 15. "How come only the skinny ones get to be stars?" Allison Cole, 17, adds that she'd like to see more plus-size mannequins at the mall. "There is no one in the world who's a size 00, and that's what [stores] portray," she says. "If the mannequin had more curves, you could tell what would fit." □