

DAILY NEWS

Weight-loss boarding school helps teens shed bad habits

BY NICOLE CARTER

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It's not easy being a kid, especially when you're carrying a few extra pounds. While the city's attempt to curb the childhood obesity problem with more fruit carts may convert some kids from Big Macs to broccoli, others, like [Lawrence Madsen](#), need a little more help getting fit.

[Lawrence](#), a 17-year-old born and brought up in [Manhattan](#), was so determined to drop his excess baggage, he skipped town and enrolled in a weight-loss boarding school. "Losing weight is a matter of choices, and you can make the right choices," says Lawrence, who lost 90 pounds at [Wellspring Academy](#) more than a year ago and is still maintaining a healthful weight.

Wellspring Academy, just outside [Fresno, Calif.](#), opens its doors to people ages 13 to 24. Currently scouting locations in the Northeast for a sister school to open in June, the academy teaches kids to change their entire lifestyle, rather than just put them on a diet. And Lawrence is proof that a method aimed at long-term change can work.

"I used to get foods with a lathered-up sauce or heavy vinaigrette, but now I know better and I can make better choices for myself," says Lawrence, now a senior at the [Calhoun School](#) on the upper West Side.

The teen entered Wellspring, which has around 100 students, insecure and reserved, but by the end of his seven-month stay, his newfound confidence and charm made him the staff's pick to give introductory tours to prospective students.

"Now he's more confident and ready to go ahead with his life," says his father, [Steve Madsen](#), who notes that it was his son's idea to go to the school. "He is definitely committed to what he learned."

So how does the method work? Not by spending eight hours a day in the gym or severely restricting food, but by following a few simple principles: Eat less than 20 grams of fat a day (the average American eats about 75 grams), walk 10,000 steps a day (the average is about 3,000), monitor all eating and exercise by keeping a journal - and find the root causes of overeating.

"In the past, I tried a lot of other methods. But at that time, I was making excuses when I really just didn't bother to do [them], and now I realize it was my fault," Lawrence says.

And although this method may be applicable to adults, it is



Lawrence Madsen before his weight loss ...



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... and 90 pounds lighter post-Wellspring.

designed especially for teens, for whom losing weight can be significantly tougher.

"Most adults remember a time when their weight was under control, and they know how to get back to that," says [Phil Obbard](#), executive director of Wellspring. "But if you're 13, 15, 17 years old and you're 50 to 150 pounds overweight, you may not have any memory of when you were a different size or any idea where to start."

Formerly of [Brooklyn](#) and an ex-[SlimFast](#) employee, Obbard took his position at Wellspring a little more than two years ago after becoming disillusioned and frustrated with the trends in the diet industry.



Students at Wellspring, formerly called the Academy of the Sierras.

Part of the success of Wellspring's method, Obbard says, comes from putting the kids in a setting that can be duplicated anywhere once they leave. Wellspring is an accredited high school where kids in grades 8-12 attend classes as they would normally. (For the older students, the school teams up with nearby [Reedley College](#).) The staff takes the kids out to chain restaurants and teaches them how to order food that's good for them. There are also culinary classes offering healthful and easy recipes.

All of which Lawrence has applied right here, saying fast-paced city life is no excuse for bad eating habits.

At Subway and his favorite Indian place uptown, Lawrence has learned how to find low-fat options, even on a high-fat menu. And when it comes to [Starbucks](#), he orders a latte - hold the whipped cream.

WELLSPRING'S FOUR FAT BURNERS

The staff's kid-friendly tips for keeping off the pounds:

- 1. Spice up groceries:** Go on a "treasure hunt" with your child at the grocery store. Look for fat-free foods, including fat-free snacks, and see who can find the best and the yummiest in 15 minutes.
- 2. Have a walkathon:** Wear a pedometer and aim for 10,000 steps a day; 2,000 steps = 1 mile.
- 3. Read the labels:** You want to aim for 20 grams of fat or less per day. Even low-fat or reduced-fat foods often have far too much fat, so watch out.
- 4. Keep a diary:** Start keeping a journal of what you eat - portion size, calories and grams of fat. Doing this even for most meals increases your ability to watch what you eat and control your weight.