

Before and After Experience

Weight loss proves life-changing experience for Fairfax teen.

By Marc Goldman
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Viewers of any episode of NBC's "The Biggest Loser" and may find themselves rooting for the overweight participants, maybe even being moved to tears by their physical and emotional battle to lose weight. Audiences cheer for celebrities like Oprah Winfrey or Kirstie Alley when they describe their personal victories over obesity. Away from the television programs and the glamour of fame, however, overweight adolescents routinely find themselves in a hateful cycle of verbal abuse, diminished self-esteem and academic shortcomings.

Two years ago, 14-year-old Vicky Maltagliati of Fairfax weighed 230 pounds. That was when she accepted her father, Paul Maltagliati's, recommendation to break out of a destructive cycle and transferred out of Robinson Secondary School, leaving home and enrolling in a boarding school for weight loss on the other side of the country.

Teased to the point of tears because of her weight since fourth grade, Vicky found comfort in eating. "It was heartbreaking," said Vicky's mother, Toni Maltagliati, who refrained from bringing attention to her daughter's weight problem in an effort to create "a safe haven from the teasing" at home. Subtle efforts at sporadic Weight Watchers meetings with mother and a weight loss camp in seventh grade had little impact. As their daughter prepared to enter Robinson Secondary School in 2005, the Maltagliatis made a discovery on the Internet: Wellspring Academy of California.

"Vicky participated in plenty of programs to get weight off," said Paul Maltagliati, who works in the Fairfax County Sheriff's Office. "But this program talked about the psychological side and would help her with self-esteem."

Together, the Maltagliatis agreed that Vicky would begin at her new school, Robinson, in the fall of 2005, but spend the second half of the school year, starting in January 2006, at the Academy, located 30 minutes outside of Fresno, Calif. The minimum period of enrollment was four months. Tuition ran into the thousands of dollars per month. For a father, sending his



Donated Photo
At 14, Vicky Maltagliati of Fairfax weighed 230 pounds.



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Following a six-month stint at the Wellspring Academy of California, Vicky Maltagliati lost 66 pounds.

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daughter away was the “hardest thing ever.” Vicky’s mother described the decision as “terrifying.”

Once immersed in the weight loss program on campus, Vicky overcame her initial hesitation in realizing she was in an environment where she “wouldn’t be judged” for the way she looked. “We help the students develop skills to keep weight off,” said Phil Obbard, Wellspring Academy’s executive director. “This is accomplished through self-monitoring, activity management and a low-fat diet.”

Students are required to log 10,000 steps at a minimum per day, nearly triple the output of the average person. Vicky’s steps toward weight loss were logged in daily, three-mile walks. She also signed up for the soccer team.

VICKY THRIVED on the structure of the program, growing accustomed to a 20 grams of fat or less diet. Regular meetings with a behavioral coach aided the emotional growth required to sustain a change in lifestyle. The coach reached out to the family through phone calls and written reports. A workshop took place to help strengthen the opportunity for success for when Vicky and the other students returned to the home environment.

Midway through her six-month transformation, Vicky returned home for Easter break. “I didn’t recognize her at the airport,” said Toni Maltagliati, a Washington, D.C.-based journalist. “I walked right by her. I realized that I lost my chubby baby and in her place was a tall, thin confident young woman, who was happy.” Vicky would go on to lose 66 pounds in six months. “I don’t want to look like that again,” said Vicky. After some initial stumbles upon her return to Fairfax, Vicky found the structure required of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. She joined the track team and committed to going to the gym “as often as possible.”

“She’s more active in school, more accepted, more confident,” said Paul Maltagliati. “And she’s on us constantly about what we eat.”

“That she’s managed to keep the weight off after 18 months is the biggest achievement, because now it is all on her shoulders,” said Toni Maltagliati. Around the house, she displays old family photos with a much larger Vicky as a badge of honor acknowledging her daughter’s dramatic, life-altering change.

Vicky is currently enrolled in an academy class at Chantilly High School for nursing. She is focusing on a career as a nutritionist.