

# Star-News

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## Meet the incredible shrinking teenager

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At age 10, Arielle Shepard weighed 200 pounds. Over time, her pediatrician, Dr. Charles Martin, became so concerned about her health that he gave her a gym membership. But when his young patient weighed 305 pounds at age 15, Martin made her a deal.

"He told me if I could lose 100 pounds, he'd send me on a trip anywhere I wanted to go," said Arielle, who goes by "Ari."

Instead of scheduling gastric bypass surgery, her family, who lives in Jacksonville, heard about a boarding school for overweight children called Academy of the Sierras of California and sent her there in August. AOS schools claim to be the only weight-loss schools in the world.



Ari lost 80 pounds there, keeping a daily food journal, going to behavioral counseling, walking 10,000 steps a day (about five miles) and eating fewer than 2,000 calories a day - all while keeping up with a regular high school curriculum.

In February, an AOS location opened near Brevard, N.C., called Academy of the Sierras of North Carolina. The mountain school now has 16 students who each lose about four pounds a week.

Ari transferred there to be closer to home and lost the rest of the weight. The school cost

\$5,800 a month, but her mother, Terri Shepard, said it was the only way to get her daughter to lose the weight.

Ari is now 16 and 101 pounds lighter than she was a year ago. She hopes to lose about 20 more pounds and wants to take a trip to the Caribbean to celebrate.

"Her attitude before the weight loss was, no matter what, she didn't care," her mother said.

"She said to me the other day: 'Mom, I like who I am and the way I look.'"

Now that she's finished her program in the mountains, Ari and her mother are reflecting on the changes in her attitude and her body.

"I was a bad kid - very defiant," Ari admitted. "I realized that not caring isn't a good choice at all."

Q. What caused your weight gain in high school?

A. "I was never an emotional eater," Ari said, adding that as long as she stayed active during her beloved softball seasons, she could maintain her weight. But in the off-season, "I'd get bored and just eat everything in the house. I'd fix a box of macaroni and cheese and eat the whole thing. . . It wasn't that I was hungry. I'd just eat it because it was there."

And she had a lot of anger, too.

"I was real talkative and got in trouble in class and got into a lot of verbal fights and I wouldn't talk about my emotions," she said. "My freshman year, I was a starting pitcher on the varsity team in high school and I didn't even get to play much because I was always on the bench."

Q. What prompted the family's decision to send you to a weight loss school?

A. A softball coach from East Carolina University came to talk to Ari about playing for their school.

"They said, 'You have amazing pitching skills, but your weight is going to hold you back,'" Ari said. Since her goal is to get a softball scholarship, that was a wake-up call. But she still fought when her parents made the decision to send her to AOS.

"We didn't give her an option," Shepard said, "because I knew in the long run, it was going to help her."

Q. Was it hard adjusting to the schools? When did it click that this school could help you?

A. Ari said it took her about a month to get focused in California.

"The first three months, I did it for my mom. And then, I did it for me because I was seeing results," she said. "I knew I wasn't going home so I thought, 'What's the point? Am I going to waste my time or what?' I like the program because it really doesn't limit you."

Q. How have you changed in the past year?

A. "I have a lot more manners now," she said. "I'm so much happier now. I used to be so frustrated with life."

And she's not angry anymore.

Her mother noted, "The therapy is what really ties it together" - helping her understand why she was eating in the first place. "Over Christmas, I saw the attitude change. She hated me to start with. But I think this has brought us closer together."

Ari has learned how to cook for herself, how to shop conscientiously and to make healthy decisions when she goes out to eat. Now, as soon as she finishes eating, she leaves the table so she won't be tempted to keep eating. Ari also keeps snacks and gum in her purse so if her friends want to go to Dairy Queen, she has a way to stay on her diet.

Q. What are you going to do with your new life?

A. "My first challenge is doing it and living it. My next challenge is really passing this on to other people," Ari said. "Obesity in kids is getting unreal, and surgery is not the answer." Ari still hopes to get that softball scholarship, but she also wants to lead a program to teach other teens how to eat better.

"I know this program like the back of my hand, and I'm ready to be home and have a life now."

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