



Do you have hefty offspring? Read this.

A local psychologist finds his business niche

May 6, 2006

By Stuart Luman

Weight-loss expert Dan Kirschenbaum was a fat kid.

Dieting wasn't fashionable back in 1967, when he was 16 years old, 5 foot 7 inches and 185 pounds. It wasn't until college, when he went on a low-fat, low-carb diet and started exercising regularly, that Mr. Kirschenbaum finally won his battle with fat. "I haven't eaten a slice of regular pizza in 20 years," he says.

Now he's helping others do the same.

For two years, the 55-year-old Evanston psychologist has been designing programs for the nation's largest chain of weight-loss camps for kids — Healthy Living Academies, a division of Aspen Education Group.

Aspen is a Cerritos, Calif.-based company that runs boarding schools, residential treatment programs and wilderness programs for troubled teens.

Mr. Kirschenbaum also designed the company's program for its weight-loss boarding school, the Academy of the Sierras near Fresno, Calif., featured last August on "Dateline NBC."

Since the first camps opened in summer 2004, nearly 1,000 kids have enrolled in the academy and Healthy Living's five camps in California, New York, North Carolina, Michigan and the U.K.

"This has been the greatest development of my career, by far," says Mr. Kirschenbaum, who also treats clients ages 5 to 90 at his Center for Behavioral Medicine and Sport Psychology in downtown Chicago. "It turns some of these kids' lives around."

A NEW GENERATION

Nearly 20% of American children ages 6 to 19 qualify as overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control. And as child obesity has grown, so has the industry to treat it.



Dan Kirschenbaum develops weight-loss programs for young people.
Photo: Stephen J. Serio

So-called "fat farms" have been around for decades — places where parents shipped their kids to go on crash diets and undergo extreme exercise regimens. But those designed by Mr. Kirschenbaum are part of a new generation that hire registered dietitians, doctors and therapists to get the kids exercising, talking about why they overeat, put them on scientifically based nutrition plans and monitor them after they leave.

Jarrett Fitzpatrick of St. Charles is a graduate. When his parents enrolled him at the Academy of the Sierras in 2004, the year it opened, he was 12 years old and weighed 220 pounds. Problems at home were driving him straight to the refrigerator. Eight months later, he had shed 84 pounds.

"I was depressed and so overweight that I couldn't help myself," Jarrett says. "I didn't understand that at all before I went."

FAT-FREE SHERBET

At the camps, kids like Jarrett are required to wear a pedometer at all times and walk at least 10,000 steps a day — roughly five miles. They usually eat about 1,600 calories a day, half of what they were eating before. They attend group therapy four times a week and can earn rewards, like more phone time or special trips, when they increase their steps to 20,000 a day.

Getting your child slimmed down isn't cheap. Attending one of Healthy Living's camps costs \$5,000 for one month or \$8,000 for two. The Academy of the Sierras costs \$5,800 a month. With a recommended stay of nine months, that's \$52,200. There is financial aid, and insurance sometimes covers some of the cost.

According to Mr. Kirschenbaum, the money is worth it. Of the kids who complete the program, 90% have kept the weight off six to nine months later with the help of follow-up phone calls and e-mails from the staff, he says.

Jarrett, for one, has stabilized at 150 pounds. Two years after leaving the academy, he was able to stop himself from overindulging at a recent lunch.

"I left more than half of the meal there and it took a lot of courage and determination to hold off and not pull that plate back to me and wolf the rest down," he says. "As a reward, I had one of those fat-free sherbets."