

Academy Aims To Get Overweight Teens Back In Shape

By Carleigh Kate Knight
Staff Writer

Academy of the Sierras, a year-round therapeutic boarding school targeted at overweight teens that is based in Fresno, Calif., will start operating on the Camp Carolina campus this September.

Camp Carolina, located on Lambs Creek Road, is renting out its campus to the Academy, which will be called the Academy of the Sierras-North Carolina, for nine months. During the summer, Camp Carolina will resume running normal camp sessions.

"This is a pretty neat program," said Alfred Thompson, Director of Camp Carolina.

"We're trying to be supportive of the school, and it allows us to make a little extra money. Plus, this does something really great for kids—it helps their self-esteem."

The Academy is a relatively new program that began in 2004. It's owned by Aspen Education Group, a company that promotes schools that deal

with various teen-age issues. The Academy is the first school that addresses obesity.

When the school began in California two years ago, almost none of the students came from the southeast.

AOS North Carolina will hopefully encourage parents and children to enroll from the Southeast because it is closer to home than the West Coast, said Phil Obbard, the executive director for AOS.

AOS is different than other overweight camps because it doesn't offer year-round academics.

Obbard said the school is accredited as an education facility in California and will work toward accreditation in North Carolina.

The Academy will focus on four main areas of an overweight teen's life—academic performance, physical activity, very low-fat eating and behavioral management.

"Students do an activity every morning and every afternoon...they try to walk 10,000

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steps a day, and we have them wear pedometers," he said.

Students at AOS only consume seven to 12 grams of fat a day, which is extremely low considering the average American consumes 85 grams of fat a day, according to Obbard.

He said 10,000 steps a day is extremely high compared to the average American who works a desk job.

They only walk 2,000 to 3,000 steps a day.

While the details of diet and exercise are important components of weight loss for students at AOS, Obbard said keeping the students mentally healthy is the most significant aspect to controlling weight.

Each student is assigned a behavioral therapist to help them make and maintain long-term goals.

"We try to create campers

who gain skills they can use for the rest of their life," he said.

AOS accepts students who are between the ages of 13 and 18, and who are 50 to 100 pounds over weight.

Unlike other overweight camps, AOS only wants students who want to fully commit to changing their lifestyle.

They don't measure the success of the program in actual pounds, but in the students' ability to self-monitor.

"We want students to adopt habits they can carry out on their own, who no longer need the school to guide them," said Obbard.

"We call it a clinical blessing, when the therapist recommends that the student has changed their behavior to control their weight. It's time for them to leave the nest, so to speak."

The Academy did follow 15 of the 30 graduating students

from 2005. More than 91 percent who left continued to lose weight or maintained their weight.

AOS does not advocate weight loss surgery.

In fact, part of the reason the Academy started was in reaction to the increasing number of adolescents receiving these risky surgeries, said Obbard.

"There are some students who are more biologically resistant to weight loss. But we are looking for more long term and resilient results. We will recommend a student join groups at home to help them continue the process," he said.

AOS also advocates against anti-depressants for obese teens. Obbard said children who are overweight are usually depressed because of their bodies, not because of a chemical imbalance.

"We usually find that as students become more active, more

healthy and start to lose weight, they can come off their anti-depressants," he said.

Obbard cannot predict how many students will start in the fall at AOS-North Carolina.

He said AOS in California had 7 students the first year. Now, they have more than 100.

The Camp Carolina facility can house about 50 students. He said the Academy will hire when necessary as the school grows, but he anticipates several dozen new full-time jobs will open up for the county over time.

Some of the staff will come from Wellspring Camp in Canton.

The camp is an overweight sister summer camp of AOS.

"When the Academy of the Sierra's-North Carolina was passed by the Brevard Board of Adjustment on Tuesday, it was a big cause for celebration. We are very excited," he said.