

With 50 pounds shed, Indiana preteen eager to return to weight-loss academy

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When Kathy Moore left her 11-year-old daughter, Marissa, at a boarding school in North Carolina in January, the sixth-grader weighed 216 pounds and wore a size 18. The previously charismatic and engaging girl had become more distant and closed, her mother said.

But when Marissa came home in May, she had dropped 50 pounds and eight sizes.

“I have my daughter back,” Moore said.

Both Marissa and Kathy, of Indiana, will be featured on Monday’s episode of “Too Fat for 15: Fighting Back,” on the Style Network, telling Marissa’s weight-loss story at Wellspring Academy. Now 12, Marissa plans to go back to finish what she started.

“I like being there. It’s not like they push you, it’s not like boot camp,” Marissa said.

And Moore has celebrated her own successes at home, dropping 53 pounds and winning the YMCA’s Biggest Loser program earlier this year.

Marissa’s story starts about two years ago. She was 9 years old when her weight started climbing, despite her active life. She played softball and basketball and swam on a swim team and had been in gymnastics since she was a toddler, but it wasn’t enough to make up for her high-fat diet.

“She was always very active,” Moore said. “People have a misconception that kids who are overweight are lazy. ... We as parents always encouraged physical activity.”

Moore said she worried Marissa would develop an eating disorder if she made an issue of the weight, so she hesitated to speak up. And Marissa’s father, Greg Moore, loved to cook rich foods such as fried chicken and ribs.

“He nurtures with food,” Moore said.

“People ask, how could you let it go?” she said. “I think if you haven’t struggled with weight or had a child who struggles with it, you don’t know how hard it is. ... I do feel guilty about what part I played with it.”

She heard about Wellspring from a co-worker whose daughter had attended, and started doing research. She chatted online with the director, read about their methods and read everything she could about the boarding school and their camps.

“It was a family decision,” she said.

And a family sacrifice; tuition is \$6,250 a month.

But Marissa just knew she wanted to reverse the trend: “I kept gaining weight, and I wanted to lose (it).”

Days start early at Wellspring. Melissa said she and her four roommates wake up at 6:30 a.m. and report downstairs by 6:55 for exercise. On Mondays, they generally run two miles; she cut her time from 18 minutes a mile to 9 by the end of the semester. They weigh in at 8:15 a.m., then have breakfast.

Since Wellspring is a school as well as a weight-loss facility, the students start academic work at 9 a.m. Marissa's classes are in buildings at both the top and bottom of a hill. She walks down to math, up to geography, down to science and back “all the way up” to language arts.

“It's a really long hill, too,” she said.

After lunch, there's an awards ceremony for everything from good behavior to extra effort to academics. There's a fat-free snack at 3 p.m. and team sports for an hour.

After dinner, group activities include step class, walking and stretching circles for an hour, then weights or cardio activities in the gym.

There's another snack, then study hall, and everyone is in bed by 9:45 p.m.

Meanwhile, at home, Marissa's parents went through their pantry, throwing away anything with a lot of fat or sugar.

“Parents have to be that role model,” Moore said.

Now Greg Moore has to use fat-free or low-fat ingredients in his dinner, and they walk or work out for family time.

“It's the little things that add to one big thing,” Marissa said. She said she's learned how to read nutrition labels to keep track of her fat intake, and how to monitor her steps, and to ask for nutritional counts at restaurants. Her goal is to take 15,000 to 20,000 steps a day.

“If I ride my bike for an hour, it's 12,000 steps,” she said, though she also swims or walks on a track to get her steps in. “That's basically what I do.”

For Marissa, watching her fat intake is the most important.

“What Marissa has to accept and what I have to accept is you can never eat like a normal kid,” Moore said. “What we really learned is everybody's body is different; it metabolizes differently.”

Marissa has borderline thyroid numbers, but no longer has to take medication for it, Moore said.

Home for the summer, Marissa had a chance to put into practice everything she learned.

“Our thought was really to allow her to have a normal summer to try out these skills,” Moore said.

`` You really have to make it a habit."

And so far, Marissa is holding steady. She hasn't lost any more weight this summer, but she hasn't gained any, either.

`` Getting all the exercise in" is hard at home, Marissa said.

But what she really learned is simple: `` Just because you're eating healthy doesn't mean anything, you have to exercise," she said. `` They're twins."

Marissa plans to blog her progress this semester; her website will be <http://healthyliving4ever.com>.