

APPEAL-DEMOCRAT

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Local girl loses - but wins

By Kymm Mann/Appeal-Democrat

You might never guess that less than eight months ago, 15-year-old Shari Lininger was nearly twice the size she is now.

Sitting on an oversized sofa in their Yuba City home, Shari, her mother, Sandy, and Aunt Nicole chatted amicably about the ups and downs of having a weight problem and joked about hating the word "obese."



Shari Lininger, 15, shows off the dress she will wear to an upcoming wedding after losing 111 pounds at a "therapeutic boarding school" and being featured on "Dateline NBC." Friday was the first time the Yuba City teenager felt comfortable enough to wear a tank top.

"I don't want to reach a certain number or weight," Shari said. "I just want to know that I've been successful - and this is how far I've come and I'm not going back."

Shari and three other teenagers were featured on the television program "Dateline NBC" on Aug. 17, which chronicled six months of their progress at a "therapeutic boarding school" for overweight adolescents.

Shari was 4 when she began her struggle with weight. Sandy said she hated telling her daughter not to eat something because Sandy's father made cruel "fat jokes" about her growing up and she didn't want to pass that on.

When Sandy found Shari hiding in her closet with a stalk of broccoli, she figured she must really be hungry to resort to broccoli, so she let her eat.

From there, Shari said she never thought much about her "problem."

"It wasn't a problem. I never let the weight stop me from doing anything," she said. "I was a cheerleader, I played volleyball, basketball, softball, all that."

When Shari was 14, she got into trouble at home. Up to that point, she said, she had been using food as a coping mechanism but didn't realize it. She tried to stop eating but used other unspecified "methods" to cope with stress.

Her parents knew it was time to intervene, and in searching on the Internet, Sandy found the Academy of the Sierras, which helps overweight youth between 12 and 18 change their lifestyles.

Shari did not want to divulge her weight for print, but said she would have been "well over 400 pounds" by now if she hadn't gone there in

January.

"I've lost 111 pounds, but I want to lose 60 more," she said, tugging on her sparkly tank top.

Shari said her biggest struggle was coming to terms with the "fat person" she had been denying for so many years. The academy, located in Reedley, Fresno County, required her to meet those denials head on in therapy.

"I was making people think that I was OK with my body the way it was, and I thought I was happy," she said. "I never let being fat stop me from doing anything, but I know there was something different about the way people were treating me."

Shari said she was given "a look" by restaurant servers when ordering something considered unhealthy. Her friends would leave her standing in the mall while they went to talk to boys, and while she pretended it wasn't bothering her, Shari was feeling like she wasn't a human being.

Obesity runs in the family, Sandy said, and she had a stomach staple plus gastric bypass 20 years ago when she reached 450 pounds. Within 10 years, she said, she had gained 100 back.

As she and her husband were working full-time and irregular hours, they relied on fast food for nearly every meal.

"I had all kinds of guilt, wondering if I was a good mom and why I couldn't control her eating," Sandy said.

The Liningers took out a loan for tuition, which averages \$5,500 per month. Sandy said she did what any parent would do to help their child with a serious problem.

"Dateline" followed Lininger and three of her friends, showing their rigorous thrice-a-day exercise regimes, their outer and inner transformations, and the difficult task of confronting their problems head-on.

Shari had a mentor at the academy: Molly Carmel, the deputy clinical director.

"I don't think I would have ever gotten as far as I did without Molly," she said. "She saved my life."

After transitioning from the academy - they avoid the term 'graduation' because the students never graduate from weight control - Shari went to upstate New York for the summer to be a counselor at a similar camp.

Shari's mother and aunt both say her self-esteem and outgoing personality have not changed, but deep down, Shari is different.

"I am in control of my life. I don't want to lose weight just because of all this attention, I want to lose weight to be skinny," she said. "I don't want to always be known as 'Shari the former fat person.'"

Sandy said she would pay much more to help her daughter stay healthy.

"Even if Shari gains back every single pound, it's worth it, because as a mom I feel like I'm giving her the tools to be healthy," she said. "I couldn't give them to her because I don't have them, but I found people who could provide them, so that made it absolutely worth every penny."