

Local teen shares her weight-loss struggle

Raleigh News & Observer

August 9, 2010

While weight-loss reality shows are plentiful, few of them focus on childhood obesity, an issue so serious it's become the charge of first lady Michelle Obama.

Tonight at 8 that changes with "Too Fat for Fifteen: Fight Back," a docu-series on the Style network that chronicles the struggles of obese teens attending Wellspring Academy in Brevard.

The show tells the story of five teens in particular, among them Raleigh's Emily Hodges, who was 11 years old and weighed 216 pounds when her family took her to the boarding school in Transylvania County. Emily was the youngest person at the campus when she was there, and there are a lot of tears in the first episode as she adjusts to being away from home and her family.

"I'm somewhat ready for other people to recognize my story," says Emily of her reality show debut. Although her family knows about the show, most friends don't and she didn't talk about it on Facebook.

Her parents say they think sharing their daughter's experience is worth it. "She has a great story to tell," says dad Jeff Hodges. "It's a story that's relevant to a lot of teenagers struggling with obesity. You see the roller coaster, her ups and downs. But it was the right place for her even though she was away. We've seen her beautiful personality return. We lost some of that in the last couple of years."

Besides Emily, the first episode introduces other teens, each of their stories offering a different perspective. There's Scotty, 14, determined to lose weight after witnessing his parents slim down after their surgery. Terinna, a 17-year-old, part Native American, was sent to the camp by Seminole elders. Tanisha, also, 17, is the heaviest, at more than 500 pounds.

Sending Emily away, her parents say, was a last resort, after multiple and varied attempts to help their daughter slim down. "We've known for a very long time there was a problem," says mom Lisa Hodges. "She was at a dietitian when she was 5."

"Outside work, this is the single biggest issue we've been dealing with for the last seven years," Jeff Hodges says. They went to personal trainers, psychotherapists, hypnosis, a program at WakeMed, an endocrinologist.

"Walking stairs was a struggle," Emily says. "I had trouble with simple things."

Especially, perplexing is that Emily wasn't sedentary. "She's always been involved in swimming, ballet, jazz, tap," Lisa Hodge says.

"I helped coach her softball team," says Jeff Hodge. "She's a good athlete, but the additional weight impacted her ability to play. And she wanted to please Daddy, so any setbacks and she would get down on herself."

Insurance doesn't pay

The couple decided on Wellspring without knowing a show was in the works ("That was an added bonus," Lisa Hodges says.); they were asked to sign a consent form for filming in January. As the filming continued, the producers began narrowing their choices, looking at children who did well at expressing their emotions and feelings.

"It was awkward at first, because I was adjusting during the first month and being filmed," Emily says. "But I got used to it after a few weeks."

"The producers told us they didn't want just another reality show," Jeff Hodges says. "They wanted to tell a compassionate story. They showed us a 10-minute reel, and we are very satisfied with the product they are putting out. It's honest about the positive and the negative."

The Hodges say they weren't compensated for their participation and there was no price break on Wellspring's tuition (during the premiere episode a \$25,000 cost is mentioned). They've relied on family for help with the costs, and say that's another reason they choose to include Emily in the show.

"We want the insurance industry to provide some reimbursement for families," Jeff Hodges says. "It's better to make an investment in the child now than wait until their 20s and 30s when they have issues like cardiovascular disease and they need medications."

Whether or not they get some compensation (Lisa Hodges says they might get some coverage for the counseling but haven't heard yet), they say the experience has been worthwhile. Emily is down to 160 pounds, her BMI going from 40 to 26 when last measured. (The body mass index for a healthy weight is 18.5 to 24.9, according to the National Institutes of Health.)

"I want to try out for different sports," says Emily of her return to her regular school. "I think it will be fun doing school teams, not being bored."

Says her mother, "It's something we can't wait to see either."