

TV series recounts Athens youth's weight struggle

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ATHENS — Even though one in every three American children is overweight, it's not easy when you're one of those kids, especially in front of a nationwide audience.

Scott Basso, 14, and his family are a little nervous about the potential ramifications of a new reality TV series, premiering at 7 p.m. today on the Style Network (Comcast Channel 65).

Scott's personal struggles with weight and self-esteem are an important part of the show, which tracks five teens who spent several months this year at a special North Carolina boarding school for overweight adolescents.

Scott's parents, Susan and Bill Basso, both of whom underwent Lap-Band weight-loss surgery in 2009, saw their son's grades drop, beginning in fifth grade, as he spiraled into depression while being teased by his peers about his weight.

That concern led the Bassos to Wellspring Academy in Brevard, N.C., where the series is based.

Susan said she hopes the series brings more awareness about a huge public-health issue -- not more taunts for Scott.

Despite their anxiety, Scott and his mother said they don't regret his participation in "Too Fat for 15: Fighting Back," a documentary-style series of eight weekly episodes.

"I know it will help a lot of people," said Scott, who hopes to return to Wellspring this fall.



He and his mother were to travel to New York City to appear today on NBC-TV's "Today" show as part of Style's promotion of the series.

Wellspring, part of a for-profit company in California that runs two residential academies and 11 summer camps in the United States, Canada and Great Britain, focuses on helping adolescents lose weight and keeping it off by changing their long-term behavior when it comes to eating and exercise.

The 6-year-old organization has been unusually successful at helping teens lose weight and maintain weight loss after they leave.

Seventy percent of Wellspring clients maintain their weight loss or continue to lose weight based on six- and 12-month checkups, according to chief marketing officer John Gordon. He said Wellspring's results have been published in peer-reviewed medical journals.

“Everything we’re doing is about changing behavior,” he said.

Journey begins

Scott left Athens Junior High in January, in the middle of his eighth-grade year, and spent four months at Wellspring after his mother, desperate for an immersion-type program that could help her son, found the organization on the Internet.

Scott wasn’t eligible for weight-loss surgery in the Springfield area, his mother said.

Standing 5 feet 10 inches, Scott weighed in at 366 pounds when he arrived at Wellspring. He was down to 291 pounds — 75 pounds lighter — by the time he left in late May.

“He worked hard for this,” Susan said. “I didn’t send him to ‘fat camp.’ He made the choice. He wanted to go. He’s not going on a diet for the rest of his life. He’s changing his lifestyle.”

Scott and his parents were asked to be part of the reality series only days before Scott arrived. Although the cameras sometimes added stress to an already stressful situation, the attention also helped many of the teens succeed, Gordon said.

The series’ title is a nod to the Style Network documentary last summer titled, “Too Fat for 15,” which tracked the weight loss of British teen Georgia Davis at the North Carolina camp.

No easy camp

The new series follows five teens, some lighter than Scott and some heavier.

Television viewing is limited and Internet access and electronic games are banned at the camp, where teens attend academic classes, learn to make low-fat meal choices and attend group and individual therapy sessions with behavioral “coaches.”

Campers exercise three times a day on the picturesque terrain, trying to take 10,000 steps daily, the equivalent of five miles, with the encouragement of a goal-oriented fitness coach.

The camp costs \$6,250 a month. A preview copy of the first episode describes how some families draw on retirement savings or go deep into debt to send their kids.

None of the campers was paid to participate in the series, and Wellspring wasn’t paid by the producers, either, according to officials from the school and Style Network.

Scott’s time at Wellspring cost about \$25,000. The school provided a \$5,000 scholarship that wasn’t connected with the series, and Scott’s church — Third Presbyterian in Springfield — donated another \$5,000. Most of the rest has come from a fundraiser held by friends and donations from friends and strangers to an account set up at Athens State Bank.

Another \$3,000 in debt remains. The family is waiting to see how much of that will be paid by the family’s Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Illinois health plan.

Susan, 40, a home day-care provider, said her family, which also includes 12-year-old son Tyler, “lives paycheck-to-paycheck like everyone else.” Bill Basso, 37, is a Comcast technician.

While Scott was gone, Susan wasn’t sure how the family would pay for Wellspring. Even now, she’s uncertain how her family can afford to send Scott back for at least several months of the fall semester.

The Bassos’ appearance on “Today” might lead to more donations, she said.

“We put it into God’s hands,” she said. “God has a plan in mind, and he’s kept it going.”

What series shows

The series doesn’t appear to manipulate the students or over-dramatize situations.

The first episode shows Scott crying from homesickness and straining to run and walk a mile with the other campers. It also shows Scott, who used to play first base in a youth baseball league, talking about wanting to feel less sluggish and to fit into a favorite football jersey once again.

“I want this so bad,” he says on camera.

The episode reveals that he had lost 22.5 pounds after three weeks at Wellspring while consuming 1,200 to 1,500 calories a day.

“I really didn’t think I would lose much, if any, weight,” Scott later told The State Journal-Register.

His mother says on camera that she is proud of Scott for coming to North Carolina.

“I’m going to get my happy son back,” she says.

Back in Illinois, Susan said her son went through a lot in North Carolina, both good and bad. At one point during the filming, he had to have his gallbladder removed, a complication of his obesity, at a nearby hospital.

However, his fitness improved to the point where he completed a 5K race while at Wellspring.

Family changes, too

Susan said she has drastically changed what she feeds her family as a result of Scott’s experience.

But she has been frustrated to find that many low-fat and low-calorie options, such as mayonnaise and soft drinks, cost more than the originals. Some of Wellspring’s preferred meats — venison and buffalo, for example — can be pricey for a family on a budget, she said.

Scott acquired a taste for raw carrots at Wellspring, which his mother is glad to help him continue at home. She has ramped up her family’s overall consumption of vegetables.

Scott continues to walk every morning in his neighborhood, and he occasionally works out at Springfield’s Anytime Fitness, which has given him a free membership.

Still, he has regained a few pounds this summer, which isn’t unexpected, his mother said.

Scott says on the show that he wants to lose a total of 150 pounds. He said last week that he has no specific weight-loss goal and only wants to make sure the behavioral changes he began at Wellspring stick.

He wants to return to Athens High School by the spring semester and eventually join the baseball, basketball and football teams.

His mother said she is glad she and her husband sought outside help for Scott.

“I finally came to the realization that I couldn’t help him,” she said. “Somebody else had to help him. I didn’t want to be buying a casket. Now I feel in my heart that it all is going to work out for Scott.”

She said she hopes other parents learn from her family’s experience and take seriously their children’s weight gain, and the depression that can accompany it.

“It’s the elephant in the room,” she said. “Don’t ignore it. Don’t think it’s going to go away.”

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How to prevent childhood obesity — tips for parents

* Become a better health model: Drink at least one more glass of water every day. Walk 10 minutes longer every week. Cut down on one indulgent food or drink every week. Ban the “clean your plate” rule. Slow down when you eat.

Don't talk about your weight or put yourself down in front of your kids. And try not to complain about how much you may dislike exercising or eating healthy foods — your kids will hear you. When you learn something new or a health tip that works for you, share it with the family.

* **Talking healthy with your kids:** Weight is just one indicator of health and often an extremely sensitive subject for kids. Emphasize how important it is to eat right and be physically healthy instead of just losing pounds. Set food or activity goals, such as planning to have dessert only twice a week or walking for 30 minutes after dinner every day — not losing a certain number of pounds. Kids are more likely to stick with an activity if friends are involved. Encourage children to invite friends for active play dates, such as bike riding and touch-football games.

* **Dealing with picky eaters:** Get them excited about healthy food by letting them smell, touch, taste, ask questions and try fruits, vegetables, yogurt and other foods in the kitchen. Get your kids involved in grocery-shopping decisions. Try to set aside your meals as family time, so turn off the TV and enjoy eating together. Bring healthy snacks when you pick the kids up from school, after sports practices and at other times when you know their stomachs will be grumbling.

* **The nine-hour rule:** Make sure your kids get at least nine hours of sleep each night. When kids don't get enough sleep, they can be moody and perform poorly. They'll have less energy for sports and other physical activities, and they'll be more likely to choose unhealthy foods or snacks.

* **Limiting screen time:** Watching TV, watching DVDs, playing video games and surfing the Internet all crowd out time for regular physical activity. Experts say children should get at least 60 minutes or more of physical activity every day. Sitting front of a screen also encourages snacking on unhealthy foods.