

# The Province

## Teens learn to battle bulge

Boarding school is extension of 'fat camp' concept

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The Province

*Sunday, September 28, 2008*

There were a few unusual restrictions when Veronica started college in California last year.

First off, no cellphones were allowed. Same went for DVD players, TVs, cigarettes and physical relationships. Internet use was limited. As for going home for the holidays? That was discouraged, too.

To any other 18-year-old about to embark on college away from home -- that mythic rite of passage to adulthood -- the rules would surely be seen as absurd, verging on the obscene.

But Veronica was quite happy to oblige.

She was fully aware of what she was getting into when she decided last year to attend Wellspring Academy -- billed as the world's first and only obesity boarding school.



CREDIT:

Wellspring Academy is billed as the world's first and only obesity boarding school. A small but growing number of obese Canadian teens and young adults are turning to this school, which has campuses in California and North Carolina, as a last resort.

"I went in there knowing I was signing my life over to these people," she says matter-of-factly.

Veronica, who asked that her last name not be used, is part of the small but growing number of Canadian adolescents and young adults turning to Wellspring Academy as a last resort to fighting obesity.

The boarding school, which has two campuses in the U.S., is aimed primarily at high-school students, although college classes were added to its curriculum last year.

Veronica, now 19, decided to spend a year at the Reedley, Calif., campus after nearly a decade of battling the bulge.

The five-foot-nine-inch Vancouverite weighed 210 pounds when she left home in August 2007.

After two terms spent tracking calories, grams of fat and daily steps on a pedometer, Veronica returned home in May a glorious 60 pounds lighter.

**"Fat camp" is now a ubiquitous concept.**

With the rise of childhood obesity rates across North America, sending kids to summer diet camps has become a popular option for parents who can afford it.

Wellspring Academy is essentially an extension of the "fat camp" concept, offering a year-round weight-loss program combined with education.

To attend, students must be at least 30 pounds overweight and have been struggling with their weight for two years.

They must also be willing participants -- and not forced by their parents to go.

The school does not come cheap.

At \$6,250 US per month and average stays lasting eight months, it has been oft-noted that attending Wellspring costs more than going to Harvard University.

Ryan Craig, the Canadian founder of Wellspring Academy, defends the comparison.

"A lot of people get their knickers in a twist [about the cost]," he says. "But we're a health-care program . . . We try to keep it as affordable as we can." Students at Wellspring trade personal freedom for an isolated and regimented lifestyle.

"Low fat, low cal" is the mantra here. Students adhere to a diet of under 20 grams of fat a day and roughly 1,200 calories (although there's room for more with increased exercise).

Meals are served in the cafeteria, where students acquire a taste for buffalo spaghetti, turkey dogs and low-fat bean burritos.

Everyone is given a pedometer upon enrolment -- and the goal of 10,000 steps a day. Exercise is slotted for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening.

Contact with friends and family from home is limited.

And even college students like Veronica had their personal property searched upon arrival, with cellphones and other distractions handed over to the faculty.

Students can earn those "privileges" back by meeting certain exercise and diet goals.

Craig explains it's all about keeping students focused. Wellspring is meant to act as a life-changing catalyst and is built on combining the best practices for weight loss, he says.

Although Craig was never a fat kid, the Yale law-school graduate and Toronto native has long been interested in education, which is how he came to be the founder of the school.

The program, formerly known as the Academy of the Sierras, first started as a summer weight-loss camp.

Then, four years ago, Craig saw a niche for kids who were trying their damndest at camp, but still couldn't meet their goals.

Thus came the idea to open an obesity boarding school in 2004 in a little farming town just outside of Fresno, Calif.

"At the core, we're really changing behaviour," says Craig. "It's very difficult to unlearn behaviour, but we give them the catalyst."

For overweight kids who have long been ostracized and alienated at school, Wellspring turns their world upside down: Fat is normal here. So is emotional turmoil.

Every kid at Wellspring knows how it feels to live in a society that glorifies skinny as perfection. They also know the years of accumulated hurt that comes with failing to meet expectations.

As a result, individual and group therapy is a big part of the program.

Veronica says she would not have gone were it not for that fact.

Like many of the students at Wellspring, Veronica's weight gain was closely linked to other emotional traumas in her life.

With the benefit of hindsight and therapy, she can now pinpoint the exact moment it all started: She was nine years old and starting a new school with her best friend. But within a year, Veronica found herself "left behind" and largely friendless.

"That year, I put on all my weight," she recalls. "I became very shy, very anti-social. I didn't have any friends that year in fourth grade, as far as I remember." During her adolescent years, eating became an emotional crutch, which turned into a vicious cycle.

"You're depressed and because you're depressed you start to eat and you get overweight. And the fact that you're overweight makes you more depressed, so you eat more," she explains. "You just sort of chase your own tail." With

high school came some half-hearted attempts to diet, although exercise was always an intimidating concept.

"I felt ridiculous at the idea of me going to the gym," says Veronica. "You know, there'd be me -- this 10-, 20-pound overweight kid -- and the jocks. That didn't work in my mind. I was just never comfortable with it." After being diagnosed with clinical depression while at university in New Brunswick, Veronica returned home to the Lower Mainland to take a year off from school.

It was then that her mother, after doing research on the Internet, discovered Wellspring Academy.

She suggested the idea to Veronica, who hesitated at having her parents spend so much -- but ultimately decided it was worth a try.

In the end, Wellspring offered more than just a diet plan: It was also a place where she was free from judgment.

"With overweight people, it's hard to make friends because you're always worried about whether people are gonna judge you because of the fact that you're overweight. And that big thing was gone because everyone was there for the same reason," says Veronica.

"It made it that much easier to make friends." n Obesity is a complex condition with no easy answer.

Doctors remain divided on how best to treat it, considering obesity is often associated with other diseases such as depression, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and sleep apnea, to name just a few.

In B.C., nearly 30 per cent of youth are overweight or obese, according to a Statistics Canada 2004 survey, based on information collected in 2002. (Results of an updated survey are expected to be released in 2009 or 2010.) The cost of adult and childhood obesity on the B.C. health-care system is enormous. The B.C. Medical Association pegs it at about \$563 million a year, according to a 2006 report.

By 2015 this figure is expected to rise to \$852 million, assuming obesity rates do not worsen.

Dr. Tom Warshawski, an expert with the Vancouver-based Childhood Obesity Network, says while he sees nothing wrong with the obesity boarding school concept, he questions the long-term effectiveness of such a program.

"You can definitely get short-term gains [at boarding school]," he says. "But then, will that be sustained?" Craig says 70 per cent of students maintain their weight loss after leaving the school.

He says that's because students leave equipped with coping skills such as frustration tolerance, and a clear understanding of consequence.

Warshawski, meanwhile, is an advocate of family-based programs. Often, the parents -- and what they stock in the fridge -- are as much of a barrier to kids' successful weight loss.

For that reason, Warshawski wants to see the provincial government funnel more dollars into B.C.-based weight-loss programs, such as "Shapedown" at B.C. Children's Hospital, which targets lifestyle change for the entire family.

Dr. Perry Kendall, B.C.'s provincial health officer, says Victoria is working to make it easier for people to choose healthier eating options.

"We are trying to do for weight what was once done for tobacco," says Kendall.

In June, B.C. hospitals started to stock their vending machines with healthier snacks. And junk food is expected to be eliminated from B.C.'s public schools by 2009.

These initiatives, however, will not likely do much for a kid who's 60 or 100 pounds overweight, as many of Wellspring's students are.

It goes some way to explaining the school's rising popularity. In 2004, Wellspring had just seven students when it opened its doors; today, it has about 90 students, including four Canadians at its California campus. Another 50 students attend its North Carolina campus, which opened in 2007.

Next year, Wellspring plans to open a weight-loss summer camp in the Lower Mainland. It's believed to be B.C.'s first diet camp aimed exclusively at youth. Currently, Wellspring runs 14 summer camps in the U.S., U.K. and Australia.

Veronica remains an ardent supporter of Wellspring, despite having put on 10 pounds since returning home in May.

The breakthrough, she notes, is that for the first time she doesn't feel defeated by that fact alone.

"It's not the end of the world and I know that," she says. "There are certain times when you're like, 'Oh, I'm so stupid. Why did I do that?' But at the same time . . . I have the tools I need to get back on the wagon -- to get back to doing what I was doing."