

Boarding school teaches ABCs of weight control Academy for obese children reaches beyond short-term fixes

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REEDLEY, Calif. - Required exercise at 7 a.m. sharp. No personal televisions or computers. A cafeteria bereft of potato chips and candy bars but full of good-for-you vegetables.

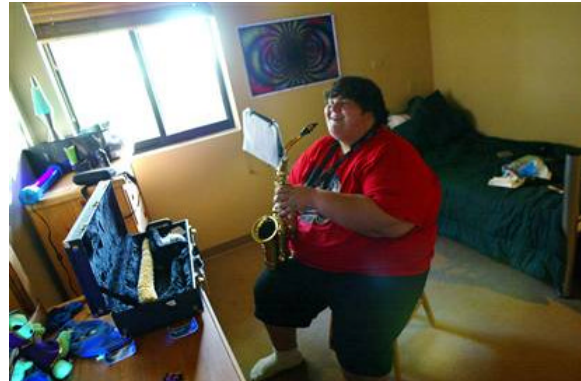
Mal Mahedy's new school has tons of rules that other teens would find intolerable. But Mal, 16, embraces the lengthy list of do's and don'ts. She hopes it will finally help her overcome the one problem she says has plagued her since she was 10— her weight.

The 5-foot-8, 285-pound teenager started her junior year this September at the Academy of the Sierras, a new yearlong therapeutic boarding school for overweight adolescents.

"This is definitely the last resort before surgery," Mal said.

The school combines a strict eating plan and a ramped-up activity schedule with counseling and college prep courses to attack students' problems from several angles. And, students say, it all happens in a supportive atmosphere, without the taunting and teasing that made life hard for them in other schools.

The academy, which has just a dozen students but expects 25 by year's end, is billing itself as the ultimate solution for teens like Mal, whose ranks have swollen in recent



Terry Henry plays the saxophone in his dorm room at the Academy of the Sierras, a new yearlong therapeutic boarding school for overweight adolescents

decades. A May report by The International Obesity Task Force estimated that 10 percent, or 155 million, of kids worldwide between 5 and 17 are too heavy. Almost 45 million of them are obese, which generally means 30 percent or more over ideal weight.

In the United States, about a third of young people are overweight or obese, and diabetes is on the rise, too. Experts say fat children face low self-esteem and are more likely to be targeted by bullies.

Private schools and summer camps — and to some degree, public schools — are trying to offer healthier meals. But the Sierras' founders say its first-of-a-kind, comprehensive program will reach beyond short-term weight loss to alter students' lifestyles.

"We're almost making them professors of successful weight loss," said Molly Carmel, the school's deputy clinical director.

A spokeswoman with the National Association of Independent Schools, an umbrella of 1,200 day and boarding schools, said she was not aware of any similar programs. Neither was the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, geared toward kids with emotional or behavioral problems.

Ryan Craig, the academy's chief, said the parent company, Aspen Education Group, has poured \$5 million into renovating the 68-acre campus, a former psychiatric hospital near the Sierra Nevada. It has a staff of 25 and can handle 70 students. Further renovation will make room for up to 150.

The school is designed for large students' special needs. Dorms have steel beds and solid chairs, toilets are attached to the walls and a digital scale can weigh up to 800 pounds.

Beyond reach of many overweight kids

Aimed primarily at 13- to 18-year-olds who are more than 30 pounds overweight, the school costs a hefty \$5,500 a month — in line with most therapeutic boarding schools but about twice the cost of typical prep boarding schools. That can put the Sierras academy out of reach for many children who might need it most.

According to Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of U.C. Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health, many overweight kids are from low-income households and tend to be children of color — specifically, Latino girls and boys and black girls.

Aware of the financial hurdle, Craig said the school hopes to offer scholarships in six months, and students can also apply for loans.

Mal's parents, who sent her to this town southeast of Fresno from Naples, Fla., are paying mostly out of pocket, with health insurance covering around a third of the cost.

"They just want me to lose the weight so I can have a better life," Mal said, taking a break recently from a daylong orientation held in the sweltering San Joaquin Valley heat.

The school's inaugural class has kids from across the country, ranging from 80 to 250 pounds overweight; among them is a boy who weighs about 500 pounds.

Wearing pedometers to help count their daily steps, seven students began the morning with a two-mile walk. After a short lecture, the recreation director told them it was time for another short walk to jolt them awake.

"Oh, God," groaned Terry Henry, already the class clown.

The rigorous schedule is designed to jump-start a sedentary lifestyle that has turned kids into 3-year-olds when it comes to activity, said clinical director Daniel Kirschenbaum.

"At home, I just sit around and eat a lot," said Jamie Schleifer, 15, who had unsuccessfully tried Curves, a fitness center, and the Atkins diet to whittle her 5-foot-two, 207-pound frame.

Students' days are meticulously mapped out from 6:45 a.m. to 11 p.m., with activities in the morning and the evening. They get three meals and two snacks a day, and food options come in two categories:

They can eat limited portions, up to 1,200 calories, of "controlled" foods, such as potato pancakes and smoked salmon. But they can have their fill of "uncontrolled" foods — fat-free cottage cheese, vegetables or fruit — as long they record them in their diaries.

The menu also favors diet soda over fruit juice — "We eat our calories, we don't drink our calories," said Craig. The diet is low on fat and high on protein.

Academics are also tied to weight loss. Electives include culinary arts and fundamentals of the body, and there's a greenhouse where students can grow vegetables, learning how food gets "from seed to table," Craig said.

There's no doubt that such a controlled program will make shedding weight inevitable, but the question looms as to what will happen when students return home, even though school officials say they plan extensive follow-up.

"Once they leave this structured environment, they are going to head back into the world that all of us live in," said Berkeley's Woodward-Lopez.

Meanwhile, the school's first class reveled in being among like-bodied peers. During an icebreaking activity, a staff member playfully threw a succession of tennis balls to Terry Henry.

"I told you I wasn't coordinated," he said when he dropped one, using a well-worn tone intended to ward off barbs.

But there weren't any barbs, and no one laughed. Another series of balls came his way, and this time, he caught them all.



Terry Henry fixes a plate of salad during dining period Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2004 in Reedley, Calif., at the Academy of the Sierras, a new yearlong therapeutic boarding school for overweight adolescents. The school combines a strict eating plan and a ramped-up activity schedule with counseling and college prep courses to attack students' problems from several angles. And, students say, it all happens in a supportive atmosphere, without the taunting and teasing that made life hard for them in other schools.



Jamie Schleifer, right, is shown proper weight lifting methods by instructor John Peterman Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2004 in Reedley, Calif. at the Academy of the Sierras, a new yearlong therapeutic boarding school for overweight adolescents. The school combines a strict eating plan and a ramped-up activity schedule with counseling and college prep courses to attack students' problems from several

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Terry Henry does pool exercises Sunday, Sept. 12, 2004 in Reedley, Calif., at the Academy of the Sierras, a new yearlong therapeutic boarding school for overweight adolescents. The school combines a strict eating plan and a ramped-up activity schedule with counseling and college prep courses to attack students' problems from several angles. And, students say, it all happens in a supportive

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Mal Mahedy, 16, reads her calorie book Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2004 in Reedley, Calif., at the Academy of the Sierras, a new yearlong therapeutic boarding school for overweight adolescents. The school combines a strict eating plan and a ramped-up activity schedule with counseling and college prep courses to attack students' problems from several angles. And, students say, it all happens in a supportive atmosphere, without the taunting and teasing that made life hard for them in other schools.

(AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian)