

Intense program helps Naples teen

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By Lisa Johnson

One school of thought about learning a foreign language is that total immersion works best.

For some young people, total immersion in a therapeutic environment may end their struggle with obesity and lead to healthier futures.

That seems to be the case with 16-year-old Jamie High of Naples.

When she arrived at the Academy of the Sierras in Reedley, Calif., in September, she weighed 240 pounds (standing at 5 feet, 10 inches) and felt angry and frustrated about her situation.

Jamie has struggled with her weight since she was in kindergarten, and she isolated herself from peers throughout her elementary and middle-school years. When she entered high school, she refused to be seen eating lunch and deprived herself of food from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., until she reached home.

"I didn't want other people to see me eat because I had experiences at the lunch table and was called a pig for the amount of food I would eat," she recalled, adding that she would take copious amounts of junk food from the kitchen and lock herself in her bedroom and binge. Afterward, she'd eat dinner, and sometimes she ate snacks before bedtime.

"For me, food was an emotional thing," Jamie admitted. "I knew it was always there and couldn't hurt me. It couldn't call me names and couldn't talk back to me. It was something I had control over."

After Jamie's grades suffered and her denial of the problem increased, her relationship with her parents began to deteriorate. The arguing escalated, and the decision was made to send Jamie to a boarding school. She was given a choice of two similar programs and chose the Academy of the Sierras because she felt it was "a better structured program." It was also co-educational.

Jamie admits that she didn't expect much from the program when she arrived at the sprawling campus in California, thousands of miles away from home. Jamie had attended a summer camp two years earlier and lost about 15 pounds in two weeks. When she returned home, however, she gained the weight back — plus an additional 60 pounds.

"I expected this program to be easy and eat what they told me to and do what was asked, but I found out right away that it would be hard, and that I would have to work at it to be successful," she said.

So far, Jamie is on the right track. She has lost 52 pounds and weighs 188 pounds. She expects to lose 28 more pounds by June.

"This program works because you have lots of support," she said. "When I came here there were 70 other students and staff who were encouraging me and congratulating me on losing three pounds a week. I never had that before and it was really nice to hear."

She also believes that the behavioral component, self-monitoring and daily activity are critical to continued success.

"If you try and skip a step here and there, there are things you will miss and it doesn't work," Jamie said. "You can't skip one thing or your whole routine is out of whack."

The new experiences also are a bonus of the program, Jamie said. She ate cucumber for the first time and actually liked it. She also eats carrots and other vegetables that she wouldn't touch before because she thought they were "disgusting."

Obbard said Jamie is making progress but stopped short of calling her a success story.

"I don't like to call anyone a success story until they are out the door and doing this on their own," he said. "Jamie's tremendous accomplishments are a sign of future success of long-term weight control."

The academy's spring semester started Jan. 30 and runs until June. The total enrollment at the school is 85 students, 27 of which are new enrollees, according to Ryan Craig, the Academy of the Sierras founder and executive director. Weight ranges of students depend on age and gender. Younger girls are typically 50 pounds overweight while older girls are between 80 and 100 pounds overweight; younger boys are 60 pounds heavier and older boys about 100 pounds heavier.

The school had seven students when it opened in September 2004. Now there is a waiting list. There are plans to expand the program to accommodate the demand, Obbard said.

Although the program has seen its share of success stories, those accomplishments come at a price. Tuition at the private school is \$5,800 per month. On average, students remain in the program three to six months.

To date, no scholarships are available, but academy officials hope to offer them soon. Until then, some companies are sponsoring students. In addition, some insurance companies reimburse one-third of tuition costs because of the therapeutic component — which for one local teenager, is working.

"I know I got something out of this program," Jamie said. "I'm so much healthier. I've lost 52 pounds and changed outlook on life. Now I realize that living healthy is a better thing to do."