

People



"I'm different here," says Jamie Schleifer (far right, with classmates on Sept. 28). "At home I am totally shy."

Like all her peers, Schleifer keeps a journal tracking food eaten (a typical day: 1,200 calories, including 10g of fat, 70g of protein and 20g of fiber) and steps walked: "Yesterday, I hit 15,000."

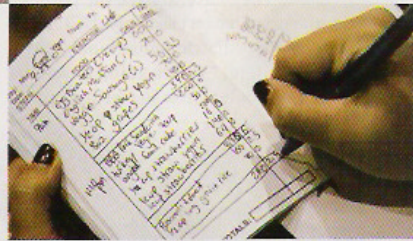
Class Size

At a new school for overweight teens, students learn diet and fitness—and what it feels like to be average

During a predawn, two-mile walk by the peach orchards near Fresno, Calif., a group of boarding-school students, their pedometers tallying every step, passes a classmate riding a bike; his weight tops 500 lbs. Were this almost any other school in America, the fat jokes would be flying. But as the biker huffs by, his peers at the Academy of the Sierras just wave "good morning." "There's no teasing here," says sophomore Jamie Schleifer, 15. "We're all the same."

Her words could well be etched into the newly minted school's crest. A private boarding academy launched in

September, Sierras is believed to be the first school intended to educate obese teenagers while helping them slim down. Along with a college-prep curriculum, students aged 13 to 18 get a low-cal diet, mandatory daily exercise, private and group therapy and a strict set of rules, including no TV outside of the gym (see box). The school's initial 12 students, who pay a hefty \$5,500 a month tuition, range from 80 to 350 lbs. over their ideal weight. For some of them, says Sierras's executive director Ryan Craig, it's an option that will help them avoid "surgical intervention."



Operated by the for-profit Aspen Education Group, which also runs weight-loss summer camps and boarding schools for learning-disabled and troubled kids, Sierras employs a staff of 25, including 5 teachers, 10 residential advisers and 3 chefs. The menu allows students up to 1,200 calories a day of main courses, such as chicken burritos, plus unlimited fruits and vegetables. (Staffers eat the same chow, though they're allowed seconds.) The teens also take a class in healthful cooking. "We don't teach [dieting] fads, we teach direct science," says deputy clinical director Molly Carmel. Acceptance from classmates

Body



Schleifer, who had never played soccer before, led her team to a win after scoring the first goal. "The food is amazing," says Schleifer (at lunch). Today: barbecue pork, onion soup and strawberry yogurt (330 calories).



is as important as any lesson. At their previous schools, says academic coordinator Krista Chikwava, many of Sierras's kids had been "teased or bullied, so they quit," she says. "It's exciting to see the kids watch their successes here."

Some in the field question whether an approach that separates teens from their families can lead to long-term success. "They have to have the parents' support or it won't last," says UCLA professor of pediatric endocrinology Naomi Neufeld. "You're going to see the same problem you see with summer

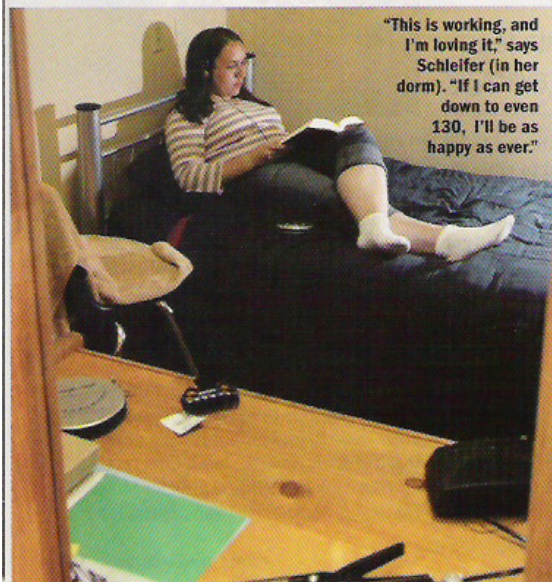
camp: regain." Craig, a Yale Law grad who previously directed two of Aspen's weight-loss summer camps, expects the year-round, intensive schedule to help students better the 33 percent success rate his campers had in keeping the weight off. "Eight weeks isn't long enough," he says. "A semester or two can change the way a student thinks about diet and activities."

After three weeks at Sierras, the students, who live two to a dorm room, are clearly motivated, cheering each other on in their first attempts at team sports

and sharing poems about coming out of one's shell. Schleifer, who came from Edison, N.J., hoping to drop about 80 lbs. from her 207-lb., 5'2" frame, enrolled after learning she was a candidate for Type II diabetes. The younger daughter of an Army reserves sergeant major mom (who was divorced from her dad when Jamie was 6), she had long been depressed about her size. Even girls she counted as friends "called me 'Bessie the cow,'" she says. But here, "when I hear somebody laughing, I know it's not about me." Therapy led by Carmel, a trim social worker who weighed 300 lbs. as a teen, also helps. "Back home," says Schleifer, "I'm not one to talk about my feelings. I'm learning to here."

Schleifer has already lost 16 lbs., but despite a student loan and some insurance coverage, she can afford to attend Sierras for only one semester. She will return home just in time for Christmas with her thin mom and sister, who, says Schleifer, "can eat anything." The school provides two days of family education, then six months of e-mail and telephone coaching, but she's realistic about habits she may fall back into. "I'm a TV freak, so I'll still watch. I have to balance it with being active. It will be hard. I wish," she sighs, looking out at the orchards where she'll walk again in the morning. "I could stay longer."

By Allison Adato. Vicki Sheff-Cahan in Fresno



"This is working, and I'm loving it," says Schleifer (in her dorm). "If I can get down to even 130, I'll be as happy as ever."

SCHOOL RULES

- ✓ Walk. At least 10,000 steps a day on the pedometer.
- ✓ Move. Hit the gym, the ball fields or the pool every day.
- ✓ No computers or TVs allowed in the dorm rooms; Internet use at the library only. (And no aimless Web surfing—yes, they're watching.)
- ✓ Enjoy your three low-fat meals and two snacks every day—no contraband allowed.
- ✓ Talk: At two private and two group therapy sessions per week.

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