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THIS AIN'T NO HOLIDAY

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Some of the children had travelled thousands of miles to Cumbria, tearfully arriving in this place they had never heard of.

Their baggage included feelings such as fear, self-loathing and disgust. But there was hope for a better future as well.

Welcome to Cumbria's first fat camp.

No one here calls it that, of course. The words "fat camp" are as frowned upon as a double cheeseburger with large fries. This is a summer weight-loss camp; an attempt to tackle the near-epidemic of childhood obesity which is increasing around the world at an alarming rate.

Fat is the new F-word. As the media glorifies the thin, fat people are seen as weak-willed, greedy and lazy by the same society which sells us cheap junk food and implores us to stay at home and watch more TV.

A quarter of Britain's teenagers are obese or overweight; a figure which has doubled in the past 10 years. More junk food and less exercise have combined to produce a generation who are predicted to have shorter lives than their parents.

America has traditionally been the home of the super-sized teenager but now nearly as many British children are overweight.

With its culture of fast food and huge portions, America has long been part of the problem. But now one of its companies is hoping to become part of the solution.

Wellspring holds summer weight-loss camps around the USA. Its first camp in the UK has just opened, at the University of Central Lancashire's Newton Rigg campus near Penrith.



Weigh to go: The children head back into camp at Newton Rigg

About 30 overweight youngsters, aged 12 to 17, will be treated here this summer. Eight girls and two boys arrived a week ago. Five are from the UK, two from Kuwait, and the others from Belgium, Greece and Cyprus. Another 10 children, most of them from the UK, arrive this week with others due in August.

Whether or not the children succeed, their parents are guaranteed to lose pounds. A four-week course costs £2,900. Six weeks is £4,300 and eight weeks will relieve them of £5,200.

But they believe it's a price worth paying for their children's health and happiness.

Many American companies hold summer weight-loss camps but Wellspring claims that none offers its combination of cognitive behavioural therapy, healthy eating, exercise and adventure activities.

Wellspring claims an average four pounds per week weight loss for each child while they are at one of its camps, and that last year 80 per cent of people maintained this loss.

Deb Sweeney, director of Wellspring UK, is at Newton Rigg to oversee the summer camp. Lean and lithe in a polo shirt and shorts, she looks like someone who can lead by example. But how will she persuade overweight teenagers from around the world to change the habits of a lunchtime?

"For us the weight loss is a catalyst to lifestyle change," she says. "That's what makes us different. Really we're talking about life skills. It's not a quick fix.

"We're scientifically based. We talk a lot about self-monitoring; writing down the food they eat with calories and fat grams. All our students have pedometers. We use the analogy that they're athletes in training.

"We talk a lot about stepping out of your comfort zone in order to learn and grow.

"When you have young people doing activities and eating a controlled diet they're going to lose weight. But we give them skills to maintain that loss when they leave here."

Deb says that confidence and self-esteem issues are particularly prevalent.

Overweight children can become caught in a spiral of overeating because they're unhappy, and feeling unhappy because they're overweight.



Pep talk: Camp staff member Simon Frost, left, chats to one of the children attending the summer 'fat camp' at Penrith

The summer camp aims to find the key to each child's issues through four weekly therapy sessions; two individual and two as part of the group.

Wellspring encourages parents to drop off and pick up their children and to spend a day at the camp themselves, when they are given a "mini immersion" in the company's philosophy on exercise and diet to take back to the family home.

For the next few weeks the children will live in Mongolian-style yurt tents to encourage

community spirit: an important feeling for people who often feel isolated and derided.

"It's the whole outdoor adventure analogy, rather than sticking them in the halls of residence bunk beds," says Deb.

The children will spend much of their time in the Lake District, doing things such as rock climbing, ghyll scrambling, abseiling and canoeing.

When the News & Star arrived they were walking from the yurt village back to the campus with bags of laundry, dressed in T-shirts and shorts, having just returned from a three-day camping expedition.

Anyone who has seen documentaries about obesity in young people will be familiar with flabby limbs, rolls of fat around midriffs and faces weighed down by several chins.

None of Wellspring's Cumbria campers were as well padded as this. They looked overweight, some more than others, but not dangerously so.

Children who come to a Wellspring camp can be as little as 20lb overweight.

However much they wanted to lose, the recipe for success was displayed on a whiteboard in the kitchen which listed the calorie and fat content of Quorn, tuna, jam and bread.

Simon Frost, an outdoor education student at Newton Rigg, is working with Wellspring throughout the summer. Known to the children as Frosty, he says that the children seemed determined to succeed.

"We've had a few tears but nothing major," he said. "One of the group arrived and they weren't quite sure. But within a couple of days there'd been a complete transformation."

Deb told us that none of the children wanted to speak to the media yet. She said it's always like this in the early stages of the course, until their weight falls and their confidence rises.

She was clearly protective of her charges, saying that "People are for ever wanting a scapegoat in today's culture", and feeling that overweight kids fit the bill.

Do these children have anything in common, apart from their failure to expend as many calories as they consume?

Deb thinks not. "They're all being challenged by weight control issues. It doesn't matter if they're black, white, rich or poor."

You might not see many poor kids here but, for the ones whose families can afford it, Cumbria could be the place where their lives are transformed.

"They can change their lives," said Simon Frost. "It's not that difficult if they can put their minds to it.

"They're very nice people," he continued. "I didn't think they would be so keen to be on the course.

"They all want to be living a better lifestyle, to be keeping up with everybody else and not being left behind. They want to be picked first at football and not last."

To contact Wellspring UK visit www.wellspringcamp.co.uk or call 0161 4081264.