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EXCLUSIVE: FAT CAMP UK

EXCLUSIVE: U.S. weight loss school opens first British base

By Krissy Storrar

FOR almost half a century, they have been the No 1 weapon in the fight to stem the tide of obesity threatening to engulf America.

Fat camps push, cajole and motivate unfit young fatties to slim and get healthy with a mixture of white-water rafting, rock climbing and abseiling plus group therapy and stress-management sessions.

And now this controversial weight-loss approach is about to launch in Britain with the opening of the first US-run camp.

American fat camps - or "year-round therapeutic boarding schools for permanent weight loss", as they call them - are run on military lines and are emotionally draining.

They've already gained notoriety here through TV's *T Fat Camp* and *I Know What j You Ate Last Summer*. And even as they help youngsters lose stones they lighten parents' wallets almost as dramatically.

Mum Susan Widdicombe has already spent £15,000 on M helping her 17-year-old daughter " Carmine Glover lose weight. And Carmine was so happy with the results that she will be among the first recruits to the US-style camp in the Lake District.

Tubby teens will spend up to eight weeks with a team of US experts to make sure they embrace the camp's American philosophy.

Around 20 families have already paid up to £5,200 for their child to stay at the camp near Penrith in Cumbria.

Carmine, from Plymouth, Devon, signed up after shedding almost 4st during a three-month course run by US-based operators Wellspring in America.

Her weight had hit 17st 6lbs and she says: "I had just had enough of being overweight. I didn't do enough exercise and I ate a lot of junk. I found the camp on the internet. It went really well and I really enjoyed it. It worked for me.

"I was introduced to exercise and the fact that you can enjoy it. I lost 5lb in the first week.

"My friends were quite jealous that I was going to America. I hadn't wanted to tell them where I was going because I was worried about what they'd say, but it was fine.

"You don't have to say you're going there to lose weight. You are going to better yourself and start a different lifestyle.

"Since I have been home my mum and I have been exercising together. I am going to stick with my programme."

Now her target weight is 11st 11lbs. She says: "I am treating the course in the Lake District as a kind of refresher so I can stay on track and lose the last few pounds."

MUM Susan, a publican, says: "She had wanted to go to the camp in America for so long and I just could not afford it.

"Then I came into some money and decided that was what I would spend it on. It is all gone now but it's been well worth it. Her life has totally changed. She takes regular exercise now and her diet is so much better.

"The programme is quite American, but I like the way they get them to think."

Fat camps for children have taken almost 50 years to reach Britain. Last year a Yorkshire-based charity opened two in Scotland, but the Well-spring camp will be the first US-run one here. Using "behaviour coaches" to encourage students to "overcome emotional barriers to success" alongside adventure activities, the company is convinced its formula will change lives.

It claims 91 per cent of students keep the weight off or lose more in the nine months after the camp. Youngsters keep detailed journals, learn to cook healthy meals and go on daily adventure trips with abseiling, hiking and mountain biking.

They are given pedometers, with a target of 10,000 k steps to walk each day, and restricted to 1,200 calories a day and 12 grams of fat. Channel 5's show I Know What You Ate Last Summer followed six British teenagers at Wellspring's California camp last year.

The parents of another pupil, Nazia Choudhry, of Sutton Cold-field, West Midlands, paid almost £30,000 for her to go on a six-month course. She weighed more than 24st and was in despair after years of unsuccessful diets. The course helped her lose 6st and she was so inspired that she is planning to go back to the USA to work as a course leader.

"I think it will work really well in Britain and I would definitely recommend it," said Nazia, 19, who wants to become a child psychologist. "It is not just about weight loss - it is about the experience.

"I had put on a lot of weight since I was 10, and by last November I was 24st. I was quite depressed, I was on the verge of developing diabetes and I was having trouble breathing. I needed help and it had to be some-where with a good environment. Six months ago I was totally sedentary, but that has totally changed. We did walking, kick-boxing, spinning, football and street hockey.

THEY got me really motivated, and then you realise you're having fun while you're doing it.

"In the first week I lost 5lbs and my breathing improved. I feel so much better."

Nazia's dad Tanvir, a self-employed businessman, adds: "This was a battle we have been fighting for eight or nine years, yet in six months her life has been turned around. She lost nearly 100lb and is a bubbly, bouncy 19-year-old getting ready for the rest of her life -and yet a year ago she was suicidal. It is just fantastic."

Parents in Britain will have a choice of three camps. An eight-week camp begins on July 9, a six-week one on July 23 and a four-week one on August 6. The eight-week course costs £5,200, six weeks £4,300 and four weeks £2,900.

But not everybody shares Nazia and Carmine's enthusiasm. Dr Julian Hamilton Shield, an expert in child health and obesity, criticises parents who simply dip into their bank accounts to solve the problem.

"To take children away from their natural environment, put them on a strict diet and make them do adventure training will obviously make them lose weight," he concedes. "But things are unlikely to have changed when they return home. The family environment is crucial.

"Parents need to be a part of the process and the family should learn together how to cook proper meals and exercise. Long-term results from camps like these are unlikely. It is an extremely expensive and very unsatisfactory way of losing weight."

Wellspring's founder, Ryan Craig, counters: "It is about weight loss but we focus on changing behaviour. We do that by self-monitoring, keeping a detailed written record of what they are eating and how they feel.

"For many of the students there is also some disruption in the family - maybe divorce or bereavement - and the child resorts to food to deal with the stress. We teach them other coping methods."

Dr Colin Waine, chairman of the National Obesity Forum in Britain, believes the camps could be a useful tool in the fight against obesity but fears the cost will put off poorer families.

He says: "I don't think the camps will suit everyone, but it is an experiment that is worth doing. The problem of childhood obesity is a burgeoning one.

"It is a problem that needs to be tackled. The NHS and the government will have to do something."

A year ago Nazia was suicidal. Now her life has been turned around