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Tobacco Road now 'diet capital of the world'

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DURHAM, N.C. (AP) — As she sat atop the remains of the patio chair that crumpled under her weight, Jean Anspaugh realized it was time — time to leave law school, leave her home in California and head for the "Diet Capital of the World."



Duke Diet and Fitness Center is one of three major residential clinics for weight loss found in Durham, N.C.

AP

"I had an epiphany," she said. "I thought that's it, I can't even feel secure in my own house. That's it — I'm out of here. I sold everything I owned, just to go to Durham and lose weight."

Anspaugh's epiphany happened in the 1980s, and today she's among the thousands who flock every year to Durham, a city of 187,000 that's best known as a fading tobacco capital and home to Duke University. But for those desperate to lose weight, it's a place of pilgrimage, a place so sacred that some who have succeeded at one of the city's three major residential clinics have returned to sleep in a hotel for a night or two — just to be close to Durham.

"This is indeed a mecca," said Dr. Gerard Musante, a clinical psychologist who founded one of the clinics, Structure House. "People have come to us from all over the country. People have come to us from other countries."

Anspaugh, 50, struggled with obesity all her life and at one point tipped the scales at 300 pounds. After dieting, taking diet pills and binding herself in tight undergarments, she believed Durham was the only answer.

"To me it was the Emerald City," she said.

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Over the years, she's lost about 100 pounds in multiple visits to Durham since uprooting from Sacramento 20 years ago. Now living in Fairfax, Va., she has kept off about 80% of that weight loss.

People whose weight is a major health concern often need to put everything in their life aside so they can accomplish their goals, said Dr. Robert Rosati, who works for the Rice Diet Program, one of Durham's three residential clinics and the one where Anspaugh was treated.

He believes a key reason for the program's success is "when you come here, you have made a huge commitment. You have to uproot yourself, it costs a lot of money.

The Rice center was the first diet program to open in Durham, in 1939. Three decades later, Duke University opened the Duke Diet and Fitness Center, followed in 1977 by Structure House. Each clinic offers a distinct program for weight loss and emphasizes follow-up support methods so patients can maintain their success after leaving.

Musante said Durham is where doctors and researchers first started looking at obesity from a scientific and psychological perspective.

"Back when we started, people didn't know really where to go for this problem," he said. "And we were the only people working on it."

And the residential model is hugely attractive. Teresa Khirallah, 31, of Irving, Texas, arrived weighing 355 pounds, scared by a warning from her doctor that in 10 years, she would either be in a wheelchair or dead.

While at the center, Khirallah wore a swimsuit in front of other people and took a self-defense class — things she would have been far too embarrassed to try outside of Structure House. She lost 22 pounds in her four-week stay and then continued to lose after leaving and now weighs 198 pounds.

"It's almost like your own private life to try out things that you always wanted to do in a safe environment," Khirallah said. "Where you could do these things and not worry. You were able to take risks."

The privacy offered by the clinics, and Durham's relative anonymity among the celebrity and fashion capitals of the world, is also a major selling point. Over the years, such celebrities as James Earl Jones, Harry Wayne Casey of KC and the Sunshine Band and comedian Buddy Hackett have ducked into Durham to lose weight.

Andre Leon Talley, the 56-year-old editor-at-large at Vogue magazine, came to Durham when he realized he was dressing differently to hide weight gain. The New York City resident lost 28 pounds in seven weeks at Duke earlier this year and hopes to lose another 28 over the next year.

"It is a wonderful place of well-being," Talley said. "It's a place of positivity. You can reach the goals that you set for yourself."

Spending time at one of the diet centers in Durham isn't cheap. Duke, for example, charges new patients up to \$7,245 for a four-week stay. Each year, the diet centers generate an estimated \$51 million in local spending, the equivalent of the money generated by the 4,000 meetings and conventions the city hosts each year.

Experts point out that losing weight doesn't require something as radical as spending the time and money it takes to enroll at a residential facility. Small, gradual diet

adjustments can also be effective, said Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietitian with the American Dietetic Association.

"The idea of doing something radical to kind of shake it up can really spur people," Blatner said. "Because the idea is that success can spur success ... but I believe that small changes can make a big difference (too)."

But those who have experienced success in Durham swear by the residential approach. Anspaugh even said she dreams of taking extended stays at each of the city's diet centers.

"I used to know people who came from New York to rent a hotel in Durham just to be in the same city where they lost weight," Anspaugh said. "I used to think they were crazy, but now, I kind of understand. It's something about being there."

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