

Silver Lining

Spotlight on Seniors

Intermediate Strength Class at the Joslyn Center

By Ryan Doolittle

Any senior looking to avoid a healthy flow of exercise-induced endorphins would do well to stay away from the Joslyn Center in El Segundo. Specifically, the Intermediate Strength class taught by Randy Okuda serves seniors a hefty portion of pumping, stepping and sweating to the techno oldies, followed by lightweight core strengthening exercises. “He busts their butts in there, gets them going...” says Patti Wood, a Recreation and Parks specialist stationed in the Joslyn Center. “But he’s really good because he’s taken a lot of classes for seniors to know what they should and shouldn’t be doing, so he doesn’t push them the wrong way. So they all love him...his classes are always full. He’s our biggest class.” Shirley Williams, second vice president of the El Segundo Senior Citizen’s Club, reemphasized this notion. “Randy is the reason people like to come to this class. He’s a lot of fun.”

As a disco ball hangs from the ceiling, up-tempo, remixed versions of classic favorites such as “Great Balls of Fire,” “Do You Love Me,” “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” and “At the Hop” boom from wall-mounted

speakers, allowing for an energetic and fun exercise hour. One class member wore a shirt that proclaimed “Old Guys Rule.” Another woman, apparently just returning from a week in Hawaii, scurried in 15 minutes late and was greeted with a smile from a fellow class member. Later, after the two were caught chatting, an amused Shirley Williams playfully called them out from her position at the front of the room. “Randy, you’re not working those two hard enough.” “I haven’t seen her in a week,” said the woman. “We have to catch up.”

Such friendliness and ease of social interaction was abundant. During a core strengthening exercise in which Randy asked the class members to lay flat on their backs, then sit up with arms extended, one woman clearly excelled above the rest. As she sat suspended with the difficult and correct posture, an adjacent man teasingly exclaimed, “Show off!” The joking didn’t stop there. When it was time to work the biceps, Randy told the class, “Let’s go to your biceps. We’re gonna do double. Double your pleasure. Double

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Local Nonprofit Works to Change Dialogue on Senior Health, Substance Abuse

By Erik Derr

When Debbie Levan was growing up, the holiday season was a time of eager promise and celebration --- that typically eroded into feelings of anxiety and despair. “The memories of my adolescent and young adult years’ holiday times are scarred with images of my family’s drinking,” said Levan, who vividly remembers worrying about how she, her siblings and parents would return home safely after family gatherings and then “what was ahead the next day.”

Levan, who later earned first a bachelor’s degree in psychology and then a master’s degree in public health from UCLA, remembers her mother and father as “good, honest, hard-working, God-fearing people. As in many families of the generation, my mom stayed home raising four children while my dad worked outside the home as an engineer.” And also like many others of their generation, they looked to alcohol after a hard day’s labor. When her father returned home from work, “my parents would pour themselves their evening drinks, vodka on the rocks, to relax. It seemed very natural and common,” said Levan.

But somewhere along the way, as the challenges of raising adolescents grew and her children started “leaving the nest, my mother began losing her sense of purpose in life. Her drinking became more and more a way to cope.” While her mother’s alcohol consumption increased, so did her use of over-the-counter medicines, as first she drank and then tried to mask the symptoms of her abuse.

Then one night, at only age 53, Levan’s mother collapsed at home and was rushed to the hospital, where she died shortly after from what doctors found was a bleeding ulcer, exacerbated by a mix of alcohol and medications. All of her mother’s family, “including Dad and my siblings,” Levan recalled, “were in denial about her alcohol problem. Had we only been aware, perhaps she would be living still today.”

Levan’s story is hauntingly familiar to that of Daniel Crawford, 43, a South Bay delivery driver who lost his parents in a car accident 10 years ago because his father --- who his family didn’t know suffered from depression --- had been self-medicating himself with over-the-counter drugs. As a result, his father fell asleep behind the wheel of his car and ran into an oncoming truck. “God, it was terrible,” said Crawford. “I still don’t understand why he thought he could fix things himself.”

When senior alcohol and drug abuse was first identified as a national problem about 35 years ago, “we were talking about those who grew up during the Depression era, many of whom joined the military right after high school, and where tradition dictated that the woman’s place was in the home,” said Levan. “Smoking and drinking was the rule, not the exception...problems associated with alcohol and medication misuse were a natural consequence of the day.”

According to a 2005 study by the American Psychological Association’s Office on Aging, alcohol abuse is among the eight leading causes of senior death. Additional

data collected between 2005 and 2006 by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health and published recently by the American Journal of Psychiatry showed binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks on the same occasion within the past 30 days, was reported by 14 percent of men and three percent of women age 65 or older. Higher rates were reported by those in the 50-64 age group, 23 percent of men and nine percent of women. Another report, developed during the same time by the national Substance Abuse and Mental Health Association, showed combined alcohol and medication misuse affects an estimated 19 percent of all older Americans.

“I truly believe that raising awareness of the dangers, helping people understand the risks and sharing stories of tragedy and triumph over substance abuse problems is what can make a difference --- has made a difference,” said Levan, who today heads up outreach efforts throughout the South Bay that focus on the mental health needs of older residents, particularly substance abuse prevention and education.

She serves as a divisional director for Behavioral Health Services, Inc. a community-based health and social service nonprofit based out of Gardena, and oversees “The Medicine Education Program,” a drug misuse prevention effort, along with “Promotores de salud,” or “Health Promoters,” a nationally-recognized project that provides culturally-appropriate education about health promotion and alcohol and drug abuse prevention to senior volunteers, who then take what they’ve learned into the Latino community.

An appointed member of the Aging Constituent Committee of the California Department of Alcohol & Drug Programs and an active member of the American Society on Aging, Levan also manages through BHS the South Bay Senior Services, a program that reaches over 400 new seniors each month and offers care management and in-home supportive services--- including a registry of in-home caregivers, friendly visitor and telephone reassurance services---to home-bound, frail elderly and disabled adults.

Since its inception in the 1970s, Senior Services has helped over 13,000 residents in Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach, Torrance, Lomita and Palos Verdes, linking them to resources that allow them to live more safely in their own homes. “I really think if my parents had known about something like Behavioral Health, that comes to you into the community, things would be a lot different. We would have had more happy Christmases,” said Crawford, the driver who lost both his parents in a car crash.

Of course, Lavan remembers her own mother and father at every step of her journey. She talks about them with those who will listen. “I feel that if my words, my story can impact the lives of older adults or their family members to help prevent this tragedy from happening to their loved ones,” she said, “my job is worthwhile.”

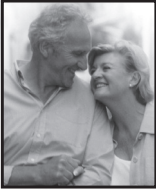
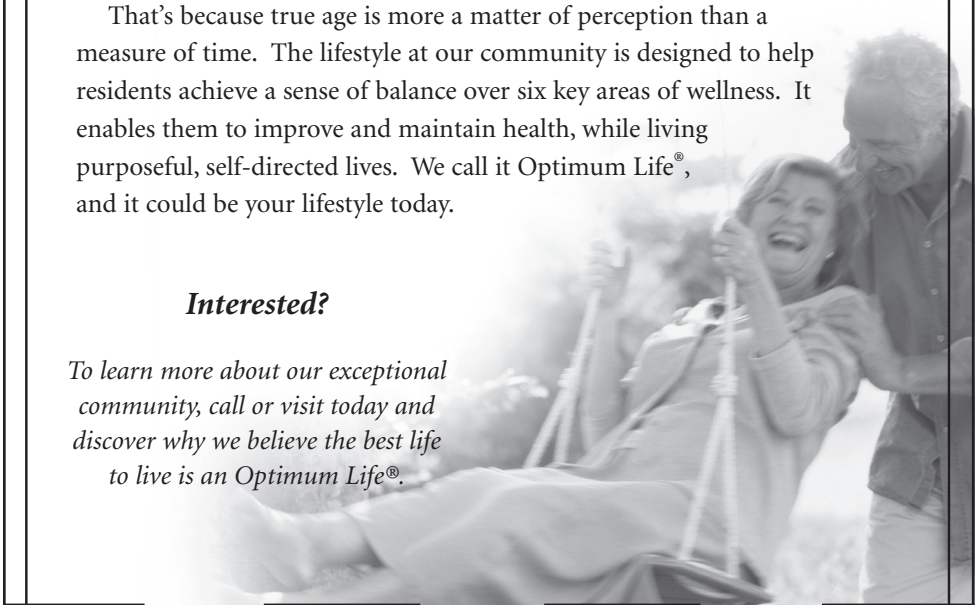
More information about Behavioral Health Services and its South Bay Senior Services program is available online at www.bhs-inc.org or by calling (310) 679-9126. •

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