

Exercise, socialize and stay happier

By Ellen Waldman

March 2, 2015

In the book, "What Makes Olga Run: The Mystery of the 90-Something Track Star and What She Can Teach Us about Living Longer, Happier Lives," Bruce Grierson explores what a 94-year-old can tell us about how our bodies and minds age.

This is an amazing story of Olga and others like her, who in their much older years have been able to demonstrate successful physical endurance. I suggest you read this for an inspiring out-of-the-box look at later-in-life achievers. You won't be surprised that the Ashland library has a copy.

If you're like the majority of people, you might not become a track star at any age, let alone once you're over 90. But the benefits of regular use of the physical body, be it through a formal exercise program or an active daily life, has been well-documented. Raise your hand if you've never heard this before. We all have, but the question is, how does Ashland stack up for those who want to improve their lives at a health or fitness center?

The Ashland Family YMCA (www.ashlandymca.org; 541-482-9422) is a familiar landmark in town. Its calendar of events and full program for older adults encompasses not only what most people expect from a fitness center, but a whole lot more. The Y is multi-generational and offers not just exercise, but also socialization. It cannot be said that one of these is more important than the other. I spoke to Laurie Evans, health enhancement/older adult director of the Y, about her view of why older adults come to this facility. Here's what she tells us:

Why do people join the Y?

Adults over the age of 55 years join the Ashland Family Y for many reasons. Some of them join for health reasons, and many join because they know a healthy, fit body will allow them to live independently longer. Exercise strengthens muscles supporting joints, strengthens the heart, lowers blood pressure and helps regulate blood sugar levels and more.

What type of exercise is offered for this age group?

The Y offers many classes designed for the changes in the body associated with aging. Classes like Joyful Joints in the pool, or Senior Circuit classes for strength and toning, not only help with the physical part of fitness but also become a social outlet for many. The Y offers tai chi, which helps with balance, and many other programs for the "55 and Better" crowd.

What other types of activities can people participate in?

We have social activities as well, such as monthly birthday celebrations, Sunday dances, guest speakers and more. Our 55 & Better members make up the largest demographic group at the Ashland Y.

Their membership fees vary, but they also have a program where some insurance companies pay for your membership. From the Y's website: "Silver & Fit is a fitness and healthy aging program designed to

help you achieve better health through regular exercise. Silver & Fit is offered through many insurance plans and covers membership fees in full for older adults of Medicare age and up."

Although the YMCA has been here for many years, it's certainly not the only option for older adult fitness in Ashland. I count eight other health and fitness centers in the local directory alone. Each has its appeal, and I encourage you to find the one that best fits your needs.

I did want to mention Baxter Fitness Solutions ("For 50 and Beyond") on Oak St. (www.bfitsolutions.com; 541-488-9515). This is a totally different environment from the Y and offers a unique approach to each individual's needs. Andy Baxter is a highly trained expert and a super athlete in his own right. His program is well-suited to those who have had knee or hip surgery but also for those just wanting to re-invigorate their health. It's smaller, more intimate and has a dedicated and devoted group of long-standing members.

From its website: "We offer orthopedically sound, medically based exercise specifically designed for people who are fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty — even ninety years old (!!!) who wish to become or remain fit, active and healthy. We address the arthritic, metabolic, neurologic and cardiovascular limitations associated with the aging process ... and combat them!"

With these two fitness centers as examples of local choices, there is something for everyone who wants to stay physically and socially active. Many years ago, I read a study involving older, frail individuals who were wheelchair-bound. They were enrolled in a controlled-exercise program over the course of many months. By the end of this study, everyone who was engaged in this program was walking again. Bodies were meant to move, people were meant to socialize, and if you can have this available in one safe place, all the better.