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The Hospital Affiliate

Five years ago, Ken Smithmier found CrossFit. Then it found his hospital.

By **Andréa Maria Cecil**

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Terri Smithmier

**Ken Smithmier, president and CEO of
Decatur Memorial Hospital.**

Ken Smithmier has a history of experimenting with diet and exercise.

The 59-year-old hospital CEO has called himself a vegetarian, a runner, a weightlifter, even a cyclist.

But it was one evening in 2008 that led him down a different path. He picked up his copy of *Muscle and Fitness*, eventually arriving at Page 142. There he found the article “Sweat Storm”—the tale of a *Muscle and Fitness* staff writer who plunged into CrossFit.

After reading all seven pages, Smithmier made a decision.

“Well, OK, I’ll start that tomorrow,” he thought.

The next morning he visited CrossFit.com. The workout of the day was Murph.

For time:

- Run 1 mile
- 100 pull-ups
- 200 push-ups
- 300 squats
- Run 1 mile

CrossFit.com’s instructions: “Partition the pull-ups, push-ups and squats as needed. Start and finish with a mile run. If you’ve got a 20-lb. vest or body armor, wear it.”

Smithmier did at least 30 days of benchmark CrossFit workouts, learning movements via instructional videos. He did it alone at a Globo Gym until one day the owner talked to him.

“Ya know, there’s a guy who comes here in the afternoon and he does some of this weird shit you’re doing,” Smithmier recounted him saying.

That guy was Cole Namken, an ex-military officer who worked at a local manufacturing plant.

Smithmier had found a training partner.

Late in April 2009, both men traveled to Indianapolis, Ind., for a CrossFit Level 1 Certificate Course.

“At that point, I really started to realize that this stuff could have some impact on people’s health,” Smithmier said. “And I was very excited about it from a hospital and community point of view. And since I’m president of the hospital, I have some latitude to do that kind of thing.”

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—Ken Smithmier

When he got back, he called a lunch meeting with the trainers involved in Decatur Memorial Hospital’s community-wellness program. He told them about CrossFit.

Smithmier could only imagine what they were thinking: “Here comes the 50-something CEO, having called all these 30-something trainers, telling them something about their expertise.”

He added: “I assumed some eye-rolling was happening.”

So he didn’t push too hard.

“I wasn’t going to force them to do it.”

But a couple of the trainers shrugged and decided to give it a try.



After finding CrossFit himself, Smithmier wanted to offer it to the hospital’s employees and the surrounding community.

They took a 12-foot-by-12-foot space, jerry-rigged some equipment and started doing CrossFit themselves.

“And I had no idea,” Smithmier said. “And so they said, ‘We think you’re right.’”

They started small, training collegiate swimmers at a local liberal-arts school. Over time, they noticed improvement in chronic shoulder problems among the athletes.

“We progressed with that, had conversations and said, ‘Why don’t we open our own CrossFit gym?’”

CrossFit Enhance was born.

President and Coach

Smithmier expanded his executive duties to include those of affiliate owner.

The gym started with a mere 400 square feet.

“(We) put together our own curriculum, elements (classes) for getting people involved. We had one class in the morning and one at night,” he said.

Hospital ... (continued)

And gym membership, which was free, was limited to hospital employees.

Up until the last few months, Smithmier continued to teach all the affiliate's elements classes.

Today, the box is 5,500 square feet and is open to the surrounding community. It also has 75 children enrolled in its CrossFit Kids program. Membership for hospital employees is still free with an initial one-time fee of US\$100. Non-employees pay \$50 per month. As of Feb. 1, CrossFit Enhance had 483 members.

"So the thing has just taken off (like) a rocket," Smithmier said.

Still, there's room for improvement.

Of those 483, only 129 are hospital employees. Decatur Memorial Hospital employs about 2,000 people.

"We would like to see the number get up to 35 or 40 percent participation," said Josh Newton, manager at

CrossFit Enhance and a Level 1 coach.

Dianna Cardwell, a hospital laboratory worker who started training at the affiliate the year it opened, said employees don't realize what they're missing.

"The benefit that they're offering us is phenomenal. I mean I know how expensive CrossFit is in other towns, so for me to be able to do it for nothing, it's unbelievable. It's a huge benefit. I mean a huge benefit," she said.

Cardwell's husband and children also train at CrossFit Enhance.

The gym's 12 coaches teach a combined 13 classes each day, starting at 5 a.m. and ending with the 6:30-p.m. session.

"We try to be as accommodating with people as we can be while still maintaining the integrity of the program," Smithmier said.



Chad Mitchell

At CrossFit Enhance, Decatur Memorial employees do not pay a monthly fee to train.



Chad Mitchell

Almost 130 Decatur Memorial employees are taking advantage of a corporate-wellness program based on CrossFit.

Belief and Faith

Over the years, Decatur Memorial Hospital has offered “a lot” of wellness programs, Newton noted.

“This is the most successful employee health initiative that (Smithmier) has done,” he said.

And its benefits are clear—at least to Smithmier.

“Unfortunately, something like this, I can never quantify a payback on this. I just can’t. We don’t live in a wealthy area here. If I want wide-scale participation, I can’t charge what (other affiliates do),” he explained. “It’s never gonna be a profit center.”

Smithmier added: “Absent a financial return, you do it on belief and faith.”

For those interested in starting an affiliate at their own hospital, he offered some words of wisdom.

“This is not going to happen at your hospital ... unless a person with a lot of power who is at the top—or very near the top—decides to make it important to them. And it was important to me. And I think I’ve been proven right. I guarantee you, I guarantee you ... that every employee that I have in the CrossFit gym is healthier, their productivity is up, and absenteeism is down.”

Dr. John Waters, a 62-year-old interventional cardiologist at Decatur Memorial Hospital who began training at CrossFit Enhance about three years ago, went a step further.

“This model should be offered by more hospitals to their employees and to the community—because it is the developmental model for wellness,” he said.

“This is what people are asking for with the Affordable Care Act. ... This is reaching out to the community and trying to keep people in the community healthy.”



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.