

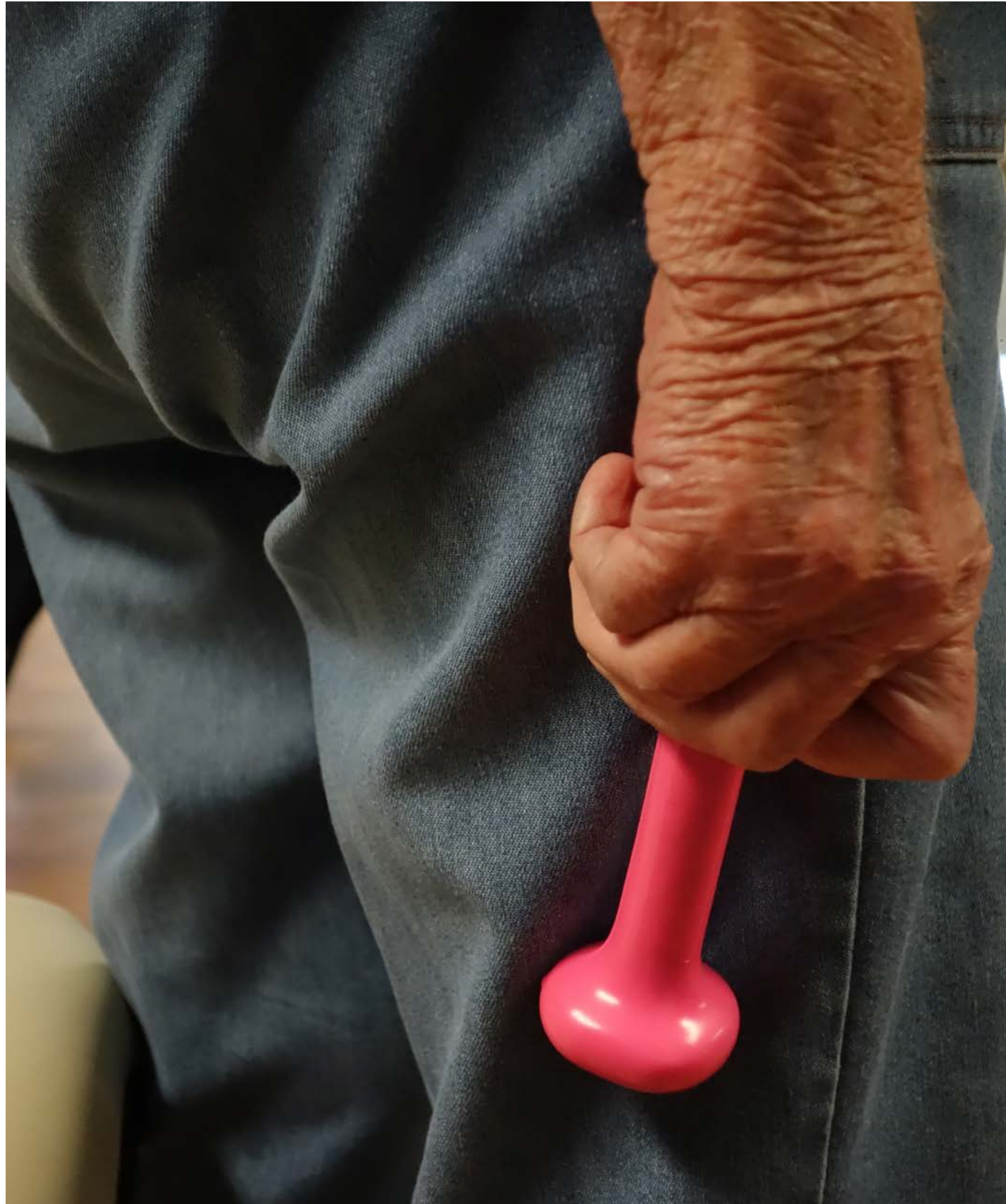


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THE SENIOR ENTERTAINER

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

After stumbling across an ad on craigslist, CrossFit Salem owner Andy Bolliger succeeded in developing a fitness program designed to help seniors improve quality of life.



Some women in Andy Bolliger's fitness class at Hidden Lakes senior-living community have requested heavier dumbbells.



Andy Bolliger (center) emphasizes the flat back in the deadlift with this group of seniors.

Square dancing was their favorite.

But as Bonnie Johnson aged, her balance became unreliable. She began using a walker. Square dancing with her husband, Norman, was no longer possible.

In summer 2014, the couple moved in to Hidden Lakes, a senior-living community in Salem, Oregon. Both Bonnie and Norman used walkers to stay mobile.

"She was falling over when she moved in," said Joyce Fowlkes, enrichment coordinator at Hidden Lakes.

That changed after the couple began attending 30-minute exercise classes twice a week.

After a few months, Bonnie was able to occasionally forego her walker in favor of her cane.

"I felt like I made a lot of improvement in my strength," the 82-year-old said.

She continued: "I don't fall over as easy. And if I start to fall, I catch myself."

Even 88-year-old Norman, who growled every time his wife made him go to the fitness classes, saw notable improvements in his mobility.

On at least one occasion, Norman abandoned his walker and took to the stairs.

"What are you doing?" a surprised Fowlkes recalled skeptically asking him when she saw him on the staircase.

Her concern was his safety.

"Norman was not walking up the stairs (before)," Fowlkes emphasized.

But Norman was bound and determined. He had been exercising.

The Johnsons are among several Hidden Lakes residents who have improved their strength, mobility, balance and flexibility since the new 30-minute fitness class started on Oct. 1, 2014.

There's a woman who can now put on her coat without help and another who can get in and out of cars by herself.



Those who attend the 30-minute fitness class say they've seen improvement in strength, flexibility, mobility and balance.

"I definitely have noticed a major difference," Fowlkes said.

That difference was Andy Bolliger, owner of CrossFit Salem.

Over the course of his time at Hidden Lakes, he's come to develop an exercise program tailored for the elderly.

"It's the best (senior exercise) program I've seen ... as far as I'm concerned," said Fowlkes, who has worked in the senior-living business for 17 years.

She added: "He definitely understands what the residents need."

FULL OF GRACE

The announcement could be heard over the community's PA system: "Exercise with Andrew" was starting at 10 a.m. in the ballroom.

Seven elderly women appeared, making their way to the cabinet in the corner of the room. From there, they plucked

neoprene-covered dumbbells—none weighing more than 5 lb.—and resistance bands. They placed the equipment on the wood flooring near chairs arranged in a circular pattern and gave their attention to Bolliger. He stood inside the circle and began directing.

First were neck rotations. Then shoulder shrugs. To break the proverbial ice, he asked them to say their names and their favorite car they ever owned.

"I'll start. My name's Andy and my favorite car ... was my Volkswagen Rabbit."

There were Buicks. And lots of Cadillacs.

Continuing with their warm-up, Bolliger led them through arm swings, leg swings while holding onto their chairs and calf stretches, then had them perform squats by simply sitting in their chairs and standing up. Repeatedly.

"How many is that? Three?" Bolliger asked with tongue in cheek.



The ladies in this Hidden Lakes fitness class completed Grace together in less than five minutes.

"Nine," 83-year-old Kay Weber said emphatically with a big smile.

Resistance bands were next. With those in hand, the women established a wide overhead grip for shoulder pass-throughs and then tried to pull the bands apart for a stretch.

"Try not to hit anyone," Bolliger cautioned. "Even if they deserve it."

Next it was time for the dumbbells.

First were presses, then clean and presses with the dumbbells starting at their sides as they stood tall.

"Bring the elbows into (your) sides, then up to the shoulders," Bolliger told them.

The ladies completed a handful of reps.

"What are we working toward here? Does anyone remember?" he asked.

Jeanette Knapp was the quickest to respond.

"Uh, Grace," the 84-year-old said.

That's right: This group of women, all over the age of 75, were warming up for a benchmark CrossFit workout: 30 clean and jerks for time.

But first, Bolliger coached them on the deadlift, emphasizing the flat back. They attempted to mimic his movement, though some were physically unable.

This group of women, all over the age of 75, were warming up for a benchmark CrossFit workout—30 clean and jerks for time.



After months of Andy Bolliger's fitness class, Delores Bennett can get out of her chair without using her hands.

Finally, it was time.

Synchronized, with dumbbells in hand, they counted aloud all 30 clean and jerks. They tapped their baby-blue, pink and purple weights to the floor, stood up and pressed them overhead.

"You definitely need some heavier dumbbells, Helen," Bolliger said to one of the women standing directly in front of him as the workout began.

"These are 2s!" she replied with wide eyes.

As they went on, 77-year-old Binky Mitchell had a realization.

"It's almost easier to go faster," she observed.

"I like the way you're thinking," Bolliger replied with a smile.

After the final rep, the ladies looked pleased with themselves, grinning at one another. There was even some clapping. It collectively took the group of nine just under five minutes to complete Grace.

With three minutes to spare, Bolliger had the ladies walk around the room while holding their dumbbells at their sides. Then, at the stroke of 10:30, they were off to Bible study.

"I didn't think I'd do this at 96," Vi Carter said as she walked toward the cabinet to store her equipment.

Carter has lived at Hidden Lakes for five years and started attending Bolliger's class as soon as it was offered.

"I think it's just right," she said, smiling. "It wakes us up."

THE ENTERTAINER

For years, Bolliger had wanted to start a seniors program at CrossFit Salem.

But when he added a couple of senior classes to the affiliate's schedule in 2010, he got "almost zero participation."

"I got discouraged because (for) a couple of people who expressed interest, price was a barrier," Bolliger explained. "(For) people from that generation, working out is an odd concept."

Three years later, though, his skills were put to the test after his now-79-year-old father fell out of a tree while pruning. The doctor recommended physical therapy. Bolliger's dad also went

to CrossFit Salem to try to regain simple physical skills, such as standing on one leg, through one-on-one sessions with his son.

"I couldn't believe how deconditioned he was," Bolliger said of his father. "He couldn't do one push-up—not even on his knees."

When he first arrived, the U.S. Army veteran could barely perform a sit-up, and squatting was out of the question.

"Those basic elements in CrossFit that we use and then amp up, he couldn't do any of them without any serious assistance."

But after about three months, Bolliger's dad was able to balance on one foot for 20 seconds at a time and squat without assistance. And he could do push-ups on his knees. The experience bolstered Bolliger's confidence in his coaching of the elderly.

"It may have solidified in my mind that I could do it because that was probably the first training I'd done with anyone over 70," he explained.

His next gig would further test his talent.

It was September 2014. Bolliger was perusing craigslist as he often did.

"Randomly every once in a while, I would just browse, Web surf, check out the jobs in the fitness section to see what's going on in our community," he said.

That's when he saw it: a job ad for an exercise instructor for seniors at Hidden Lakes, 1.5 miles west of CrossFit Salem.

Bolliger jumped at the opportunity.

He replied to the post and ended up on the phone with Fowlkes, who eventually explained the fitness class fell within the facility's entertainment budget.

"I'm not much of an entertainer," he told her, "but I run a fitness class."

Bolliger is a CrossFit Level 1 Trainer with additional certificates from CrossFit's Gymnastics, Powerlifting and Weightlifting trainer courses. Fowlkes wasn't convinced. She asked him to come in for a pro bono class.

"I was very skeptical," she said. "He did a class for free ... to show me what he could do."



Andy Bolliger's wife, Carol, said her husband's passion is to improve the fitness of all people regardless of age.

Right away, Fowlkes knew Bolliger was the right choice.

"Just the way that he was with the seniors—patient, made them laugh, he got them involved," she explained.

What was initially intended to be half an hour of resident entertainment came to be more.

"Essentially I'm doing basic CrossFit movements to the extent of their ability," Bolliger said.

He added: "We do squats every single day because they need it horribly and their mobility depends on their leg strength. We make squats the focus of our program and then we go from there."

In addition, there are deadlifts and presses.

"We go through a large variety of body-weight movements," Bolliger said. "I try to keep variety up so they don't get bored with it."

Weightless Turkish get-ups even made an appearance once after a resident asked for help on how to get down on the ground and back up again.

"I just tried to break it down step by step—put your leg here, put your arms here," he said.

Exercise, Fowlkes noted, is an important element of keeping seniors active.

"He focuses on the things that keep them healthy and balanced."

LADIES' MAN

Few athletes at CrossFit Salem know that Bolliger—a father of four, three of them triplets—spends any time teaching fitness at a retirement community.

He's not one to toot his own horn, said his wife, Carol.



Andy Bolliger leads his fitness class at Hidden Lakes senior-living community through a lengthy warm-up.

After his experience with his father, Bolliger realized seniors were part of population that needed attention, she said.

"It's not necessarily his mission, his passion. He saw a need and was looking for how to fix it," Carol explained. "His passion, in general, is fitness for everyone—whether you're 8 or 80."

Although she's never gone to Hidden Lakes to watch her husband in action, Carol jokingly added with a laugh, "He tells me ... the little old ladies love him."

She might be right.

"He challenges us. He's patient. He recognizes our limitations," Delores Bennett said of Bolliger.

After months of attending the class at Hidden Lakes, the 85-year-old said her balance has improved.

"I don't have to use my hands to get out of my chair at all. I just think he does a good job."

"He challenges us. He's patient. He recognizes our limitations."

—Delores Bennett, 85

Lily Van Someren said she's noticed improved flexibility in herself.

"All of us are hitting that age," the 90-year-old said, then laughed.

She added: "I really think it's good for us. It keeps you moving, pushes you a little bit. And he cares about us. I know he does."

Plus, Bolliger's class is better than watching the exercise video on Wednesday mornings, Weber said.

"I like the way he does it. We use weights and stretch bands and different things. I enjoy it."



Virginia Hinson, 86, uses a stretch band as she follows Andy Bolliger's direction during the warm-up.

Frances Sitko, though, might be a tougher sell.

"There's too much squatting," said the 97-year-old, who is blind in her right eye.

Still, she conceded: "It's certainly much better than nothing at all."

Van Someren offered a different perspective.

"Some say, 'He pushes you too hard.' Well, he's pushing us, but we need it, and he tells you, 'Don't go any further than you know you should.'"

She continued: "And it makes us get closer to each other."

EXPANDING THE VISION

With the success of the Hidden Lakes classes, Fowlkes has asked Bolliger to teach another class at Madrona Hills. The senior-living community is located less than half a mile away from Hidden Lakes, and Bolliger will begin teaching a weekly class there in August. Today, he's at Hidden Lakes at least once per week; every other week, he teaches two classes.

Fowlkes said she believes exercise is important for residents "for total well-being."

"If you don't use it, you're gonna lose it," she explained.

For his part, Bolliger wants to go even further with his classes.

He's in discussions with Oregon-based Holiday Retirement, which owns both Hidden Lakes and Madrona Hills, to expand the program to all of its 306 communities throughout the U.S. Holiday Retirement is one of the largest senior-housing providers in the country, according to [its website](#).

Nothing formal has materialized, but Bolliger is encouraged by his discussions with a corporate representative.

"(They) did show interest in taking this model and making it something that they could use at all their facilities," he said.

Bolliger's idea is to pair each Holiday Retirement community with local CrossFit affiliates that would use the model he created as a blueprint to lead their own fitness classes.

"I think it's a great idea," Fowlkes said.

She added: "The opportunities for him to build a program within our company are big."

In quintessential CrossFit fashion, Bolliger said he wants to shatter traditional societal notions surrounding how active seniors should be.

"It's assumed they can only just sit on the couch. It's assumed that everything is too risky," he said. "I try to tell folks, 'Ya know, all the assistance, bars, all these things that are there to keep you safe, it's great, but don't use them unless you need them.'"

He noted: "If you continue to use assistance, then you continue to be dependent on that assistance."

Improving quality of life is what Bolliger said he sees himself doing at Hidden Lakes and Madrona Hills.

"As far as I can tell, I'm the only person in their life that's saying, 'Hey, let's make things better.' That's special to me. I truly care about improving their life—not just getting them through it." ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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