

PRIME TIME

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Sneakers in Motion

By Nancy Harbert

Working out in a gym had never much appealed to Edris Davis until she discovered Silver Sneakers, a national exercise program designed specifically for PrimeTimers. That was a few years ago.

These days, you will find her at a Defined Fitness gym four days a week, 31 pounds lighter, stretching in the pool in an aqua-aerobics class or doing knee lifts to the song, “Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?” in a floor exercise class.



Going through the same motions with her in the Silver Sneakers floor exercise class are men and women who clearly know that “gray matters”; to even be admitted, they must be at least 65 years old.

Leading the 15 students is instructor Nancy Freshour, 65. Her lean, toned body is something that came along in retirement after she vowed not to let her body go “to pot.” She had never worked out in a gym.

“I came because I thought I should and I stayed because I liked it,” she says.

Freshour had been teaching cycling classes at Defined Fitness when she was asked to train for the Silver Sneakers program, which is available across the country to Medicare-eligible people through certain health plans. In New Mexico, the program is free to seniors enrolled in Humana, Lovelace, Presbyterian and Secure Horizons by United Healthcare health plans. Along with free admission to the classes, they receive a free membership to Defined Fitness gyms across Albuquerque.

Silver Sneakers is offered at more than 20 locations throughout New Mexico and more than 3,500 locations across the nation, according to Karen Kienle, account manager with Silver Sneakers in New Mexico.

Once enrolled in Silver Sneakers, participants can visit the Web site at www.silversneakers.com, plug in a zip code and find participating locations if they are on business or leisure travel. The membership is good throughout the country.

Kienle said that more than 5,000 New Mexicans are Silver Sneakers members going to gyms and taking classes in muscular strength/range of motion, cardio, yoga/stretch and aqua fitness.

Bernice Ledden began attending Freshour's class twice a week a year ago and has been a loyal student the past year. She likes how the exercises help with everyday movements around the house, from putting on a coat to opening a jar to getting out of the bathtub.

“I already have noticed my neck loosening up and that my balance is better,” she says. “But mostly I think the class helps with prevention, not letting things get worse.”

Like most of her classmates, Ledden enjoys the social aspect of the class as much as keeping her body limber. Building perspiration together week after week has resulted in friendships. Some people get together for coffee after class, and once a month, they organize a social event, such as touring Old Town or taking in a show at the Dynamax Theater. Recently, they threw a surprise party for one of the Silver Sneakers teachers who was heading off to teach fifth graders.

Freshour, who like all Silver Sneakers teachers, has been trained in an exercise methodology designed specifically for bodies older than 65. She regularly attends additional training sessions and is often evaluated.

“We can't reverse what's been done, but we can help people live happier lives,” she says.

“Through these exercises, we help people regain balance and flexibility and we coach them to pick up their feet when they walk, to avoid falls.”

During the two years Defined Fitness has partnered with Silver Sneakers, Freshour has seen students get off inhalers, steroids and cortisone shots. From struggling to stand up from a chair with a ball between their thighs even once, she sees students now go up and down from the chair 20 times with ease.

Another Silver Sneakers partner in town are the Curves for Women Fitness and Weight Loss Centers.

Daren Parks, regional athletic director for Defined Fitness, said he is convinced the program is beneficial. “Statistics show that medical claims are 30 percent lower for Silver Sneakers participants than for others in the same age group.”

Davis, who lost 31 pounds without even trying after signing up for Silver Sneakers, likes how she feels these days.

“It gets us out and moving,” she says. “I know a whole lot of people who don't do this sort of thing; they just stay home. I'm not going to do that.”