

GO THE DISTANCE

Getting fit, fitting in

Guilford's Joint Effort, for the over-50 set, opens a new exercise center in Old Saybrook

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GUILFORD » Penny Ekstrom was a disaster. That was her word.

Nearing 70, the Guilford resident had undergone surgery on her shoulder and foot, and to correct carpal tunnel syndrome. She was getting injections in her knees. Following each procedure, she had followed the prescribed physical therapy. Then the sessions ran out.

Her physical therapist counseled her to stay active, to join a gym. But, as the member of Guilford's Joint Effort LLC, which opens a new exercise center in Old Saybrook in early December, said a recent phone conversation, "I'm not someone who enjoys going to the gym."

So the retired employee at Stop & Shop in Branford and Madison continued to have injections in her knees every six weeks. She continued to suffer from asthma. She continued to feel as though she'd be healthier and have more energy if she lost some weight and got moving.

Ekstrom's husband knew George Norden, an exercise physiologist and the owner of Joint Effort. He suggested to his wife that she head over to Village Walk in Guilford, where the exercise center, or non-gym, as Norden has coined it, is located.

A 2009 graduate of SCSU, where he studied exercise physiology, Norden had interned in the cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation programs at the Hospital of Saint Raphael. There, he teamed



PHOTOS BY PETER HVIZDAK — NEW HAVEN REGISTER

David Penna, exercise physiologist at Guilford's Joint Effort, assists Jane Harris of Madison on a machine.



Katrina Cordeiro assists Susan DePino of Guilford during a workout.

up with physical therapists and doctors to develop exercise programs for patients, most of whom were older. It worked. After the nine-week program, patients would remark

on their increase of energy and strength, and their improvement in balance and sense of well-being.

The issue arose when the team told them they had to continue exercising on their own — or else lose the newfound fitness they had realized, according to Norden.

"Where should we go?" the intense, animated 31-year-old remembers them invariably asking, as he leaned on a recumbent elliptical machine in the homey, no-frills confines of the quiet, mellow lit space. "And we didn't have an answer. There was nowhere to send them."

Mega gyms were out. They

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were affordable but also intimidating, even overwhelming, with their pumped-up music-thumping, muscle-busting atmosphere and macho groans. Worse, there was little to no supervision on which machines or exercises would be beneficial to those overweight or hobbled by chronic pain.

Likewise, personal trainers. "I went through the whole personal training side of the industry and it just broke my heart," the Branford resident said. "Some people were coming every day and really seeing results from what they were working on, and they simply couldn't afford it anymore."

The East Haven native had no background in business. But he saw the need for a low-impact, guided exercise center, one that would be limited to those over 50, suffering from chronic pain or illness, or with 50 or more pounds to lose.

"I was willing to take a risk because I truly believe there has to be a change in the way the exercise industry works in relating to the needs of our aging population," he said.

At the advice of his late grandfather's friend, David Chin, he designed a business plan. He spent months devising a system to ensure members stayed motivated and accountable to their fitness goals. He mapped out a floor plan that would make going to the gym a more pleasant and safe experience for those ordinarily disinclined. He hired two exercise physiologists to monitor technique and form.

"The idea was to create a climate that encouraged members not only to show up but to stick with it," he said. "If they did that — and this is where the joint effort comes in — we'd help them develop a program to get



PHOTOS BY PETER HVIZDAK — NEW HAVEN REGISTER

George Norden, exercise physiologist and owner of Joint Effort gym in Guilford, with Cathy Stpone of Westbrook in the gym during an exercise session recently.

the exercise they needed to maintain their independence and quality of life and we'd make sure they kept at it."

In late 2013, Joint Effort opened with one member, a woman Norden had been personally training at her house as he worked on his business plan. Nine months later, despite operating on a shoestring budget, Joint Effort saw membership grow to 100, including Penny Ekstrom. Currently it stands at 200, with some traveling from as far away as Bethany and Niantic.

It wasn't just the presentations Norden gave — to the Madison Rotary, to the Schiller Shoreline Institute for Lifelong Learning, to the Shoreline Men's Group — about the importance of exercise and strength training for seniors, that explains its stunning growth, and its imminent expansion to Old Saybrook. Or the referrals from Gaylord Rehabilitation Center, among others.

Nor was it simply the old-fashioned word-of-mouth of its members urging their friends and neighbors to join. Or even the membership fee — one-eighth of the cost of a personal trainer, Norden estimates.



David Penna, exercise physiologist at Joint Effort gym in Guilford, writes down information regarding the exercise efforts of Jane Harris of Madison during a workout routine.

"It's just a friendly place," said Penny Ekstrom, describing the baby shower the staff and members threw for Norden and his wife. "You want to keep coming because you feel the staff really cares about you."

No one more, perhaps, than Marie Granucci, the perpetually sunny recreation director, who has cerebral palsy.

"Marie is an inspiration to all of us. She has a wonderful attitude," said Ekstrom. "If she can act that way, dealing with what she has to deal with, so can I."

And she has. "I enjoy going," Ekstrom said. "It gives me a sense of accomplishment. Plus my clothes fit better, my knees feel better, I feel better about myself. No more injections. Even my asthma is better."

No longer a disaster, it seems.

Joint Effort is located at 300 Village Walk, Guilford. For more information, visit jointeffortexercise.com or call 203-458-6683. Joint Effort in Old Saybrook, which will open in early December, will be located at 341 Boston Post Road.