



Seniors Helping Seniors

Interview with Janice Monfries, Executive Director and Hai Dong Liang, Project and Facility Manager, West End Seniors Activity Centre

Reflection: *"With training and support, seniors can help each other get stronger, fitter and safer."*

What changed?

The Westend Seniors Activity Centre already had a rich offering of fitness classes, such as dance, yoga and Tai chi, all led by qualified instructors who understand the specialized fitness needs of seniors. These classes were well attended, by females at least.

Today, the centre has added a full weight room, where both men and women can be seen working out under the supervision of trained peer volunteers. For some participants, changes have been dramatic. One, Vick, had given up shoveling the snow at home because he was too weak. After the program, he proudly reported being able to shovel for a two-hour stint.

Bill's transformation was even more dramatic. He went from using a walker and experiencing multiple falls to walking on his own, golfing and coaching other seniors on the correct and safe way to use the weight equipment.

How did the seniors' voice or experience inform your project?

Hai Dong Liang said once staff noticed men weren't participating in fitness offerings as much as women were, they asked the men what would get them motivated. The answer was a workout room for weight training.

"Women report having been involved in fitness for years," says Liang, but men often said they'd had no previous experience with a fitness program. But once the workout room was in place, staff knew that both men and women, even those who were already extremely fit, needed help to use the equipment effectively and safely.

They also knew from seniors that cost was a barrier to using fitness facilities and hiring personal trainers. So the idea of training volunteers for a peer support program was initiated.

How did your thinking and/or that of your colleagues change?

Janice Monfries admits to being worried about safety when they first decided to set up a weight room. And training volunteers to help seniors use the equipment? "I know I was sort of nervous," she says. She needed to be sure they understood the limits of the advice they could give and stayed within the confines of safe practice.

They had already seen Bill, the gentleman who started the program using a walker, fall multiple times at the centre. "We had to pick him up off the ground, or the parking lot even," says Liang.

“And clean up from his bleeding,” Monfries adds. “With the balance issues seniors often have, I had to develop a certain level of comfort with having them work with the heavy equipment,” she says.

But what they found is seniors like Bill who trained with weights became far safer. He wasn't falling anymore. And volunteers, once trained, ensured correct use of the equipment and served as motivators at the same time. Their observations were confirmed with a discussion with a doctor who noted how important it is for seniors to participate in strength training for their ankles to prevent falls.

What do we need to ensure all seniors who need it can benefit from this change?

Liang and Monfries have clear advice:

1. Consult with a local Primary Care Network to get guidance on the type of equipment appropriate for use by seniors.
2. Address the financial barriers that often make local fitness facilities inaccessible to seniors.
3. Provide specialized seniors training for fitness instructors and personal trainers. What works for a class of 20-year-olds is not appropriate for seniors. “Some seniors may get dizzy and fall,” says Monfries, “but our instructors are trained to maintain eye contact and watch for the warning signs.”
4. Provide specialized seniors workout opportunities. “They are often not comfortable working out in a crowded gym alongside younger participants,” says Liang.
5. Train volunteers to be peer trainers.
6. Provide exercise routines in easy to follow formats.