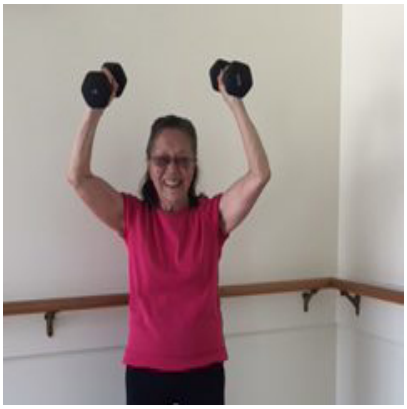

From Tea Garden to internment camp to Berkeley degree: Fitness instructor now 80 and still teaching

Description

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From tomboy to physical education teacher, competitive swimmer and exercise instructor, Tanako Hagiwara is still going strong at 80.

After age 80, more people are attending classes than teaching them. Yet, Tanako Hagiwara, who joined City College as a sports coach in 1967, is still at it â?? 51 years later.

â??I have no plans to stop teaching as long as my health allows and students want my classes,â?• said Hagiwara, 80. She wanted to be a teacher â?? to help people since third grade. â??The reason I still love teaching is because itâ??s a learning process.â?•

Hagiwara, who has a Ph.D. in kinesiology, exercise physiology and higher education from the University of California-Berkeley, was a tomboy as a child. â??My Japanese parents didnâ??t know what to make of me. But they allowed me to be who I was even though they worried I wouldnâ??t acquire the necessary homemaking skills to get married.â?•

Perhaps her parents didnâ??t have time to worry as they were living in a 17-room house, built by her great-grandfather, in Golden Gate Parkâ??s Japanese Tea Garden, helping to maintain and oversee its function.

From Tea Garden to internment camp

Hagiwaraâ??s great-grandfather, Makoto Hagiwara, was the official caretaker of the garden from 1895 to 1925. A Japanese immigrant and landscape architect trained in Japan, he personally oversaw the modification of the temporary Japanese Village exhibit at the 1894 Worldâ??s Fair to the permanent Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco.

When he died in 1925, his daughter Takano Hagiwara and her children became the proprietors and maintainers of the garden. All was well until the beginning of World War II, when Hagiwaraâ??s family was abruptly shipped off to an internment camp in Topaz, Utah. She was four years old.

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â??My parents never talked about the move and where we were living. I just accepted the reality of barbed wire and the sentries at each corner of the camp,â?• she said.

When Hagiwara turned eight, her family was released from the camp. They spent the next five years in Portland Ore. where her father worked as a food buyer for a hotel and she and her mother worked in the family business, a bean cake factory.

Coming home to San Francisco

Always wanting to return to San Francisco, Hagiwaraâ??s grandmother was able to put a down payment on a house in the cityâ??s Richmond district. It was paid for with the proceeds of the sale of artifacts from their Japanese Tea Garden house that a family friend had saved for them. Hagiwara and her son and his wife and children now live in that same house.

When Hagiwara started teaching at City College, she coached all womenâ??s team sports: field hockey, basketball, soccer and softball. Gradually, she began coaching individuals in golf, badminton, modern dance, and rhythmic gymnastics. Soon she was also teaching both women and men in physical fitness, calisthenics and water aerobics. â??Some classes held 60 to 70 people. That was fine. Nothing intimidated me.â?•

During her early years teaching, Hagiwara had married, was raising a family (two children 13 months apart) and was attending San Francisco State at night to get her masterâ??s degree. â??I chose to marry a non-Japanese man, Douglas Dawkins, and my parents freaked out.â?•

Marrying the mirror of her passion

Hagiwara had met her husband on Waikiki Beach on holiday and had fallen for this man who shared her passion for physical fitness. â??Douglas had been a wrestler and football player and was teaching physical fitness on army bases on the islands.â?•

After Hagiwara got her doctorate degree, she was offered a professorship at New York University. â??I decided not to take the position because I didnâ??t want to move my family across the country. In retrospect, Iâ??m glad I didnâ??t because I love the activity of teaching exercise.â?• she said.

Hagiwara retired from full-time teaching in 2001, and continued on as a part-timer. But, after a few years, City College wanted to eliminate positions for retired part-timers. As luck would have it, a job opened up in the Older Adults Program. â??I love teaching at On Lokâ??s 30th Street Senior Center. The energy here is so positive and uplifting.â?•

Hagiwara adds to that energy with her smiles, kind words and educable moments. â??I really think smiling and having a positive attitude changes your endocrine and hormone system, so the good hormones overtake the bad. Having a positive attitude allows you to do more things.â?•

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â??Good old American stretchingâ??

On a sunny Monday morning, Hagiwara holds the first part of her one-and-a-half hour class on the senior centerâ??s large back patio, with a gurgling fountain, surrounded by beautiful plants, flowers and partially shaded by large olive trees.

Hagiwara puts almost 40 dedicated students through their paces: meditative breathing; a standing stretch combination of yoga, Feldenkrais, Pilates and â??good old American stretching;â?• 20 minutes of low-impact aerobics to music like Chuck Berryâ??s â??Johnny B Goode;â?• weight training; and bands that add resistance through the entire range of motion.

About half the class then goes inside to the exercise room to stretch on the floor; the students also do the plank, a core-building exercise, for two minutes, and an increasing number of push-ups. â??If thereâ??s only one exercise you can do, do push-ups,â?• she said, â??Itâ??s the best for strengthening and stretching.â?•

Besides teaching three classes a week, Hagiwara swims every day in the pool in the Koret Center at University of San Francisco, getting up at 5 a.m. to swim on the days when she teaches. Even though her shoulders are not in the best of shape, Hagiwara continues to pursue the sport she loves, competing in swimming at the Pacific Masters Tournaments and in the Bay Area Senior Games.

On aging, Hagiwara says, â??Donâ??t focus on your chronological age, just live each day to the fullest.â?•

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