

Getting seniors to exercise is final and favorite of her many careers, from Leviâ??s to KRONâ??s Bay TV newsroom

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Sue Mittelman confesses to being a procrastinator. As such, she avows Walt Disneyâ??s wise words: â??The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.â?•

Itâ??s advice she wishes her mother had heeded and one she preaches as a leader of senior exercise groups.

Mittelman, whose occupations have ranged from promotion and merchandising for Levi Strauss to legal secretarial work to TV news production, is now 70, and for the past 11 years has been a fitness instructor.

The notion of this as a career was born as Mittelman observed her motherâ??s physical decline: She had severe osteoporosis, then broke the same hip twice and never fully recovered.

â??Unlike my mother, I exercised regularly and knew the heart of the problem was immobility; she did not exercise,â?• Mittelman said. â??She died in 2003 and several years later, I went to work in senior physical fitness.â?• Later was six years. â??I was procrastinating but eventually I got where I wanted and needed to be.â?•



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Mittelman at the 2019 Aquatic Park Pier-to-Pier celebration. (Photos courtesy of Sue Mittelman.)

Seniors nowadays are much more aware of the advantages of exercise, she said. â??I donâ??t have to drag anyone kicking and screaming to class â?? they want to do this,â?• Mittelman said, but cautioned that â??a brisk walk is great but other exercises are very beneficial. â??

Eleven years ago, she signed on with the Always Active program through an online ad and underwent a certification process. The classes focus on balance, muscle strength, flexibility and joint mobility. The program also provides sociability and camaraderie, as much a health need as exercise. â??People quickly discover they are not alone,â?• she said.

The key to making this volunteer stint into a real job was always saying, â??Yes, I can,â?• filling in for others, training newcomers and teaching the Fall Prevention classes, Mittelman said.

When one of the programâ??s regional coordinators retired, she was hired to take his place. She coordinates the programâ??s activities in six of the 21 Always Active sites throughout San Francisco, working primarily at the Aquatic Park Center, and handling lots of paperwork for this government-sponsored program, which is free for all participants.

Internet keeps it going

But in the time of Covid-19, when all senior centers are closed, the push to use technology has exploded, and itâ??s been beneficial to many. â??Weâ??d be in a pickle if we couldnâ??t continue the program online,â?• she said.

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While many of those in her class have adapted to doing their stretches and exercises in front of a computer, not all have. â??Before the shutdown, I knew some seniors who loved coming to the center but were happy to stay unplugged and offline forever. Now theyâ??re isolated.â?•

Mittelman grew up in Chicago in a middle-class family with an older and younger brother. â??In the â??50s we ran around the streets â?? doors were never locked. Iâ??m sure there was crime, but we werenâ??t aware of it.â?•

After back-and-forth sojourns between Southern California and Chicago, she settled into a Noe Valley apartment in San Francisco in 1977. â??Jobs were plentiful, housing was very affordable. You could work temp jobs and be OK, which I did.â?• Her only regret was not buying a place in Noe Valley when it was affordable. She moved to Oakland in 2009 and has a small condo.

Keeping a â??can-doâ?? attitude

Before Mittelmanâ??s entry into senior physical fitness, she sewed a colorful quilt of jobs and careers â?? many employers; different industries; diverse skill sets; some travel and lots of long-standing friendships. â??The running thread throughout,â?• she said, â??was a `can doâ?? attitude, flexibility and a wicked sense of humor, of which I have plenty.â?•

After working temp jobs, she landed a Levi Strauss position in promotions that lasted three years. The department she worked for was sent to the Lake Placid Olympics to provide merchandise and clothing to the athletes for the winter games. She would have gone on to the summer games in Russia in 1980, but the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the United States boycotted the event.

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With one foot in front of another, she nailed a legal secretarial position in a large law firm and worked her way up to supervisor. When she looks back at this 14-year tenure, she said, â??the job paid the bills, had good benefits and I decided that another office job would be awful.â?•

Thatâ??s when she entered news broadcasting â?? calling herself the â??worldâ??s oldest internâ?• for Bay TV, from 1994 to 2001 the 24-hour cable news channel of KRON TV. Eventually she worked on the assignment desk, the hub of any newsroom, and then became assistant producer for a current affairs program.

â??I wasnâ??t married; didnâ??t have children and it all worked for a while,â?• she recalled. â??I loved and hated the news business; it was exciting but stressful with tight deadlines. I mightâ??ve been a news junkie but not a stress junkie.â?•

KRON was sold and lost its NBC affiliation. Several news people went to an online financial news organization, ON24. Mittelman followed and became a producer. â??I didnâ??t know anything about financial news and wasnâ??t all that interested but plugged along until the tech stock bubble burst in 2002.â?• The news operation was shuttered that year.

Mittelman built strong friendships that etched into adulthood. Friends she made in 4th grade are still on her address list and remain her closest buddies. After her stint in the news business, a close pal offered her a part-time job as a media escort driving authors to and from talks, book signings and other venues. This was a time when both large chains and independent bookstores thrived.

Staying active in politics

And she kept saying â??Yes, I can,â?• as volunteer opportunities arose. She worked for the McGovern campaign and volunteered for Obamaâ??s re-election in 2012. â??Unlike too many young adults today, I couldnâ??t wait for my 21st birthday so I could vote.â?•

She stays active in politics. In 2018, she drove with other volunteers every weekend for six weeks to Roseville and Modesto to canvass for the congressional campaigns of Josh Harder and Jessica Morse. She is pulling back nowadays, â??I was hoping to do the same for the 2020 presidential campaign, but door-to-door campaigning is out of the question.â?•

All the while, Mittelman looked at senior physical fitness as a feasible career step â?? possibly one less person would suffer as her mother had. Now, sheâ??s all in â?? keeping seniors moving over 30 hours a week.

When Covid is history, Mittelman will start thinking about retirement. â??I love to travel, eat out and go to the theater. And Iâ??m learning to play bridge online.â?•

She still misses her mom, who may not have exercised but was able to pass on other wisdom about aging. â??She loved to play bridge; told me to learn because it was a good thing to do in old age. She was right. I never enjoyed playing cards, but Iâ??ll learn to if it kills me.â?•

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