

Friendships, in and out of the gym, keep her going

Dene Mayer, 82, who is heading to South Africa with a friend, loves to host dinner parties

By Alex Seise

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At 82, Dene Mayer is off on a two-week tour of South Africa with a friend 20 years her junior. It is a fitting excursion for a woman who spent her most recent birthday taking a high-impact step class at her local gym.

Mayer defies senior citizen stereotypes. She works out at the Active Fitness Center in Medford five days a week. After exercising, she volunteers at the New Visions Community Services center in Camden. And in the evenings, she loves hosting dinner parties.

Friendship keeps her going, Mayer says. She lives in Lumberton Leas, a senior community that encourages independence and interaction. "People here are very social. We invite each other in for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, or we go out for dinner. There's quite a bit of that going on here!" she said.

Mayer credits her excellent health to a mix of chance and genetics.

"You know, I think it's luck, although my parents were healthy to a ripe old age. I feel great! I never have an ache or pain. I shouldn't say that - I'll get struck by lightning!" she joked.

At the gym, Mayer astounds fellow members with her stamina. She takes a class instructed by Kelly Meyer, a local fitness expert.

"She has access to fitness programs at her living complex but finds them for the 'old people,' " Meyer said. "She started working out with me three years ago, and although I am fun, I am not easy."

During the class, Meyer barks commands. "You're not going to stop here . . . for God's sake! Come on! Two more!" she yells. Mayer is not scared by her instructor's intensity. Rather, she finds it amusing.

"She's marvelous!" Mayer said. "Her class is so much fun!"

While other members, most of whom are less than half Mayer's age, take occasional short breaks during the hourlong routine, Mayer does not stop moving. She jogs in place and bounces along with the music, smiling the entire time.



TOM GRALISH / Inquirer Staff Photographer

During a step class, Dene Meyer, 82, (left) works along with the others at a Medford gym. "Look at all of these beautiful young ladies here. They all encourage me," she said.

"I'm 41 years old, exactly half her age. She's still in there, but I'm out here talking!" classmate Lucille Schillinger said during a water break.

Widowed in 1990, Mayer has two children and four grandchildren, who support her enthusiastic lifestyle. During one step class, Mayer fell and broke her hip. Within a few months, she was back in the class.

Mayer's sense of humor also helps propel her. A retired Westchester County administrative assistant, Mayer considers herself a "transition New Yorker".

"Because I moved here from New York, I'm a Jets and Giants fan. I tried to get to be an Eagles fan, but they keep losing!" she said.



Dene Mayer is an active resident at Lumberton Leas, a senior community.

In Westchester County, Mayer helped people get off of federal assistance for more than 30 years. Her current volunteering efforts are reminiscent of her former career.

"What I'm doing now is helping the customers that come in find clothing that they need. . . . That community center is wonderful, they help so many people," she said.

Mayer's love of altruism began at a young age. As a girl, Mayer remembers a picture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that hung above her parents' fireplace. "My parents felt he got us out of the Depression," she said. The former president inspired her to become what she calls "a hopeless Democrat" who is "too old to change."

At the gym, she is surrounded by people who appreciate her determination.

"Look at all of these beautiful young ladies here. They all encourage me," Mayer said. "I am so lucky. That's all it is."

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