

## **Couple helps elderly build strength through Seniors Aging Gracefully with Exercise program**

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Phil Booth grabs a dowel and 5-pound ankle weights from his car and briskly walks toward Jane Rogers' apartment. He's running late for his second morning appointment and must keep pace.

The 84-year-old client waves her therapist in from the cold, drizzly rain on this first day of fall, and explains that she woke with a restless leg.

"The left leg just does what it wants to do. I can't control it," Rogers says.

For the next 45 minutes, Booth has Rogers "bench press" the wooden pole and perform a series of exercises to strengthen her left arm and leg. The north Boulder resident suffered a stroke last winter, which diminished her range of motion, balance and endurance.

Rogers is one of 27 seniors in the Seniors Aging Gracefully with Exercise program (SAGE) — a long-term, personal-training program for Boulder County seniors. Booth and his wife, Kylie Gertge, started the program two years ago to help seniors stay strong and independent once their short-term rehabilitation ends.

Gertge met Booth while she was studying gerontology and long-term care management at Naropa University. Booth, a recreational therapist, was designing a senior-care program. The Longmont couple combined their 20 years of professional knowledge and now have a contract to bring SAGE to assisted-living clients at Balfour, a retirement community in Louisville with 120 residents.

Gertge explains the inspiration behind the private business, Senior Wellness Consultants Inc., and the SAGE program: "I found that after 10 years of geriatric occupational therapy, I was frustrated at work. I would see great progress, then patients would plateau. They would go into assisted living centers and decline.

"We're not just doing exercises, we're looking at functional fitness for (the client's) whole life."

### **Bag of tricks**

The couple has a "bag of tricks" they use to customize fitness programs. In the trunk of Booth's car are bungee cords with handles for resistance training, wooden boards for balance and dumbbells. The client's environment — the stairs, bed or kitchen counter — becomes a gym. Creativity is important in helping seniors, many of whom must struggle just to bend down and put on their shoes.

Colorado is going to have to come up with more innovative, senior health-care options like SAGE, says Michael Schonbrun, president and CEO of Balfour. Colorado's aging baby boomers and a steady wave of new retirees have the state's elderly population growing at a rate above the national average. The number of residents in Boulder — named No. 1 as a place to retire by Modern Maturity Magazine — is only going to continue to rise.

Mapleton Rehabilitation Center and Medically Based Fitness in Boulder offer exercise programs for seniors. Assisted living centers and city recreation centers also offer fitness programs. But seniors must travel to facilities and often take group classes.

"I don't know of anyone who does what Phil and Kylie do," says Julie Edelman, a physical therapist with Boulder Community Hospital's home-care program who refers clients to SAGE. "They fill a gap in patient care once patients are discharged from outpatient programs or home care. A lot of seniors are not getting out in the world once they experience an inevitable decline."

Lafayette Senior Center has a fitness-oriented senior wellness program called "Exercise for the Homebound." The program received a grant for the second year from Boulder County, which will pay for professional health evaluations of seniors who cannot make the trip to the Senior Center. The program's seven volunteers will carry out fitness programs in seniors' homes.

"We are volunteers working side by side with seniors, and Phil and Kylie are professionals," Resource Specialist Lorna Maddux says.

Another difference is cost: SAGE runs \$30 to \$45 per session.

"It's a big goal to make it affordable, but we're a new business and we haven't been able to make that happen yet," Booth says. Susan Hausle, Rogers' mother, says paying for SAGE and help with daily living was less expensive than a retirement home. And her mother clearly wanted to live at home.

"Having Phil come to the apartment was really critical. I couldn't get my mother motivated and be there to do the physical therapy," says Hausle, a physical education teacher. After four months of personal training sessions three times each week, Rogers is able to catch Boulder's Special Transit bus and go to church on her own.

"My mother is doing as well as she is because of Phil. She needed a positive force, someone to encourage her. She needed to believe in herself again."

### **Building Trust**

After visiting Rogers, Booth heads west to Mary Ann Origer's Boulder home. The 71-year-old had both hips replaced 15 years ago due to a congenital condition. She struggles in lifting one leg at a time without a death grip on the kitchen counter to hold her balance.

"I don't know why I'm so insecure," Origer says, adding that she trusts Booth.

"But the ultimate trust is in that left leg and the hip that's going to hold you," Booth replies, his voice still touched with an accent from his native New Zealand.

Another exercise is borrowed from the Asian martial art, Thai Chi. Origer stands with one leg in front of the other, knees bent, transferring weight front to back. Every client has different exercises for his or her lifestyle and condition.

"Mary Ann's challenge is to go up and down curbs when she gets out," Booth says.

"Phil is very supportive because he gives you a sense of accomplishment," Origer says.

"He points out to me the things I couldn't do two years ago."

One thing she can now do is hold her twin grandchildren, her inspiration for starting personal training.

### **Lifelong mission**

Booth knew he wanted to work with seniors when he took elderly clients on outdoor adventure trips as a recreational therapist. "I gave 80-year-olds who never tried canoeing

or kayaking experience in the outdoors. I knew I wanted to work with seniors the moment I was on a lake with two quiet, elderly women. It was pouring rain and they just giggled."

Gertge has a lifelong mission in her work with seniors.

"My grandfather and I were best friends. We took long walks together. I remember watching my mother struggle with him. I now know he had Alzheimer's," Gertge says.

Her grandfather was abused by staff in a nursing home, she says. "The last time I saw my grandfather was when I was 9 years old. I went to the nursing home to see him. As I was leaving I turned and saw his hand on the glass door. There were tears streaming down his face. That's that day I decided I would grow up and make things different."

### **Making a difference**

Balfour Executive Director Marilyn Israel says the one-on-one attention Gertge and Booth provide motivates clients.

"Some of our residents give our staff a tough time. They won't walk for our nurses but they will walk for Phil or Kylie."

Varena DeSantis is a Balfour client who will gladly walk for Gertge. The stay-at-home mom, who loved to socialize, struggles to speak because of a massive stroke that affected the right side of her body. She holds up seven fingers, followed by one finger to show her age. DeSantis' goal is to move into her daughter's home.

"We will look at every aspect of what she wants to do: climb stairs, make a cup of tea and a sandwich. Our work is to maintain independence and prevent falls," Gertge says.

Gertge walks closely behind DeSantis down the hall, with her hands on her client's hips.

"Her weight stays on her left hip, so I rotate her hip when she walks to get her to shift weight. She gets used to the sensation and then she can do it."

During Gertge's next client visit, the trainer moves a large marble elephant statue and a chair. Another client needs to be reminded of a hair appointment.

"It's the little things that mean so much to them," Gertge says. "We take a holistic approach. We look at the whole person and what they need."

More than 20 years after that fateful day visiting her grandfather, Gertge says she is well on her way to feeling gratified with her life's work.

"For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm actually making a difference."

Senior Wellness Consultants offers free in-home assessments. For information, call (303) 772-7568.