

Oak Ridge fitness guru Hensley gears up for 90!

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 28, 2018)

Carol Plasil contacted me and asked if I would include a story in Historically Speaking for her. She wanted to see a story about another Oak Ridger who has made an impact on several people who have been her "students" in a fitness program over the years.

I agreed and she provided the following admirable input on Charlotte Hensley. If you know Charlotte, you will agree with Carol, if you do not know Charlotte, you will soon learn about her through Carol's input to Historically Speaking. Enjoy!

A woman, a mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, teacher, community expert on fitness: over the years an inspiration to her hundreds of students. Charlotte Hensley is ready to celebrate her 90th birthday with all the enthusiasm she had when she started as a "Fitness Guru" more than 50 years ago. This title was conferred upon Charlotte by her students many years ago.

Her classes for the City of Oak Ridge started in 1974 in the Civic Center; and she is still unwavering in her commitment to making her students work at being as strong and healthy as possible - at whatever their age!!! Ten times a week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday in the Civic Center, four evenings in a local church as well as three times a week with her latest class, "Gentle Movement" for people with various physical problems).

Charlotte leads a variety of men and women who range in age from mid-forties to nineties! Her students also range in size and shape. She is totally dedicated to learning the latest, most beneficial workouts for her classes and her students are constantly amazed at the variety and ever-improving moves she continues to offer.

She is constantly continuing her training. Her certification and background studies took place in workshops in venues as diverse as Las Vegas and Denmark under famed fitness experts. Her pupils believe she is the best "expert" of all!

She has learned so much about anatomy, physiology and nutrition that her students come to her with questions about individual needs. "Being in her class is like having my own personal trainer" says Linda, one of her students.

Lois, a retired nurse now 93, and another student, marvels at how "she teaches us so many new things each and every time. I don't know how she does it."

Anne, a student for 48 years, loves the way Hensley calls out instructions. We have to watch AND listen carefully so that we do each move correctly in order to get the best results. She's a great leader."

Several evening class members arrive after a full day of work as scientists, engineers, artists etc., and are re-energized by the superb workout. Jeff & Linda and Anita and Doug, appreciate that they can come four nights each week to boost morale as well as health. Both sets of married couples have been students for more than 20 years. George, a retired scientist, helps to supplement and vary the program by teaching international folk dances. The group loves to dance!

Each class features warm-ups, low-impact aerobics, strength and balance training using weights, bands, large and small balls, Pilates training for core strength and a regimen of muscle stretching. A real treat, when time, is massage sessions at the end of class!

"She is the best," says retired teacher Alice, a student from the start of Charlotte's career. "She should be in the Sports Hall of Fame." She is known to most area doctors for helping her students to stay fit and healthy.

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Carol, another retired teacher, says, "I always tell my doctors about the marvelous benefits that I get from being in her classes for over 50 years and they agree that it is working for me. Being in her program has helped me de-stress whenever personal problems have arisen in my life. And the spirit of camaraderie in her classes is of immeasurable value!"

Charlotte was a 32-year-old mother of two when she decided she needed to lose weight and get strong. She was asked to lead a class at the YWCA shortly after a few months as a student. Soon after this, she was asked to form a fitness program for the students at St. Mary's school.

Between teaching hours and raising children, she devoted (and still does) herself to learning everything she possibly could about fitness and nutrition.

Twice before, at age 75 and at age 80, the city of Oak Ridge has honored Hensley by the Mayor's proclamation of "Charlotte Hensley" day. All of her students feel that this honor is very well deserved. As far as she is concerned, Hensley says, "I absolutely intend to keep on teaching."

Thanks Carol, for a tribute to an obvious good friend and admired fitness instructor.

Tsewei Wang said of Charlotte in a recent article she wrote, "Charlotte is a wonderful example of physical fitness. She, too, has had a knee replacement and a hip replacement, but you would never know it. She constantly researches current trends and advancements in physical fitness, and the movements she teaches are perfectly geared for seniors."

Those of us who are aging often wish for our younger bodies when we attempt to do a routine task and it takes an unexpected toll on us or, at best, takes much longer than we recall the last time we did that same task. Routine exercise is valuable and dedicated effort to maintain a healthy lifestyle is vital to enjoying life.

Such individuals as Charlotte Hensley and a good friend of mine, Frances Gross, also a long-time physical fitness instructor, and I am sure there are several others in Oak Ridge who consistently assist the aging through appropriate exercise and physical fitness training, are certainly to be appreciated for what they do routinely to help those who need it most to feel stronger, more balanced and self-assured.

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Charlotte Hensley, physical fitness instructor and example for us all