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Sherwood Oaks residents take pride in pedal power



Submitted

Laverne Colangelo does some cycling while intern Kelsey Braendle looks on.

By Kristy Locklin

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Last month, Bob Fletcher biked 231 miles without leaving Sherwood Oaks Retirement Community in Cranberry.

The 74-year-old is one of 44 residents who participated in a CyberCycle Showdown.

Throughout March, team members took turns pedaling the fitness center's CyberCycle, a stationary exercise bike designed for older adults.

Users can shift gears and steer while they navigate courses displayed on a 19-inch high-definition screen.

Through Interactive Fitness, a company that specializes in virtual reality-enhanced cardio equipment, Sherwood Oaks went head-to-head in a miles-count challenge with Amica of Aspen Woods, a senior community in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

The Americans — 22 men and 22 women — logged 1,282 miles, beating their 38 Canadian counterparts, who racked up just 836 miles.

The winners will hold a victory party on April 21.

Fletcher, who racked up the most miles, is proud of the accomplishment. Although he's always considered himself an active guy, the Franklin Park native hadn't taken a spin on a real bike in decades.

When Wellness and Health Promotions Manager Bill Burtner asked him to try the CyberCycle, Fletcher, who usually hits the stepper three days a week, decided to start slow with 10 minute workouts.

By mid-March, he was on the bike for an hour at a time.

Seeing the Canadians' online statistics motivated Fletcher and his teammates to push harder. One participant - a 97-year-old man - contributed 75 miles to the cause.

"A lot of people think Sherwood Oaks is a place where you go when you can't do anything or you need constant care," Fletcher says, "but it's an active place."

Burtner agrees, noting that more than 200 residents are involved in the wellness program he started there 16 years ago. Their average age is 82.

In addition to wooded trails and cement walkways, the Sherwood Oaks campus boasts a fitness center with a treadmill, steppers and an indoor pool. A group fitness center for Tai Chi and yoga classes is slated to open soon.

The CyberCycle arrived in November 2013. Since then, folks have been lining up to use it.

Burtner, who has a master's degree in exercise science and is certified as a health and fitness specialist by the American College of Sports Medicine, evaluated everyone before they participated in the showdown.

"Some people would come down and ride five minutes a day," he says. "Our top-five riders logged well over 200 miles for the month and rode two to three times a day for 30 minutes or more at a time."

Even impending knee replacement surgery didn't sway one female resident from the CyberCycle.

"Exercise is the closest thing we have to the elixir of life, the magic anti-aging potion," says Dr. Neil Resnick, Thomas Detre Professor and Chief of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology at UPMC. "No drug, nothing, is better and more likely to give you a healthier, longer life. Exercise is the best intervention. I can't say enough good about it."

During his 30-year career, Resnick has heard every excuse in the book for not exercising, but the most common is "I'm too old."

"There is no age that exercise isn't good for you," Resnick says. "It's much more of a risk factor to be sedentary. The benefits of exercise are greater the older you get."

His advice to anyone looking to get healthier is ... move. Take short walks throughout the day. Bypass the elevator for the stairs. Do yard work.

Sherwood Oaks residents are heeding that advice.

Burtner says more showdowns are on the horizon, pitting Sherwood Oaks against communities throughout North America. Due to the contest's popularity, a second CyberCycle is being delivered to the fitness center in May.

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