

Use It or Lose It

How area seniors are staying fit, physically, socially and mentally.

BY ERIN TREDER
PHOTOS BY LAURA DIERBECK

When it comes to healthy, happy aging, you'll hear the same advice over and over again. Staying active and socially engaged are the keys to increased longevity.

"You've got to use it, or you're going to lose it," says Dennis Osmanski, who, with his wife Sharon, is running the couple's own handmade furniture business. Both are in their 80s.

The Osmanskis are part of a wave of other area seniors who've found ways to keep busy, maintain friendships and stay physically active, all while engaging in activities they enjoy.

A Hobby Turned Into a Business

The Osmanskis, who have been married for 61 years, specialize in live-edge furniture made of wood they source locally from the Kettle Moraine area.

It's a time-consuming and meticulous process. Each piece the Osmanskis create in the basement workshop of their home takes 40 to 50 hours to complete, including the cutting, sanding and staining. In addition to furniture, Sharon also creates birdhouses that are miniature replicas of Irish cottages.

The Osmanskis have long enjoyed taking on large projects. Their first major endeavor was a five-acre hobby farm the couple purchased in 1979. It was at the farm that the couple first began crafting their own wood furniture. Some of the pieces they created included small hutches, dry sinks, tables, chairs, cabinets and cupboards.

The couple expanded on their furniture building passion by opening a store to sell their creations: Darowood Farms in Door County's Egg Harbor was open for 12 years. The birth of their first grandchild led them



to close that shop and move to their current home and workshop in Sussex.

Keeping active is not an issue for the Osmanskis. Other hobbies include photography and other wood crafts, and Sharon works two days a week at Brookfield Longevity.

Dennis' advice for anyone nearing retirement? "You'd better have some kind of hobby, or you're going to get old really fast," he says. "So many people retire and don't have hobbies. You have to want to do something. You have to be devoted."

Beyond Bingo

Residents at two local senior and assisted living communities have access to a variety of unique fitness, social and learning opportunities.

Julie, 82, has been living at Saint John's On The Lake, a senior living community on Milwaukee's East Side, since 2017. She and her husband John love it. "It's absolutely remarkable," she says. "Here, seniors are not isolated in their apartments. We're constantly able to participate in a variety of activities. There's so many, you can't help but be tempted to join."

Julie and John, who previously lived in Mequon, were always active and enjoyed hiking and walking. That's part of why they love the location of their community — they frequently walk to the Brady Street Bridge



Sharon and Dennis Osmanski have a woodworking shop in the basement of their Sussex home. At middle is a replica Irish cottage created by the couple; it serves as a birdhouse.

and the Juneau Park Lagoon and dine at nearby restaurants. Julie has also taken advantage of the community's gym and works with a personal trainer there.

Some of the activities Saint John's offers include tai chi, lectures on the arts and humanities, language and book clubs and an environmental committee. In total, the community offers around 200 activities per month.

Edie Reis, 80, has been a resident at Clement Manor, a Greenfield continuing care retirement community, for six years. Working with the pastoral care department, she mainly volunteers in the community. Reis also takes enrichment classes, serves as floor representative and attends resident council board meetings. In her free time, she enjoys container gardening, baking and cooking.

Her energy and engagement has allowed her to really get to know residents and staff. "It makes you feel good," she says. "It really contributes to your overall well-being. It keeps your brain active and makes you feel good. For me, it's been a wonderful experience."

Feeling Fit and Fabulous

For others, retirement has offered the extra time and freedom to pursue interests, like personal fitness. Anita Myhra, 62, worked as a teacher for more than 30 years before retiring in June. Health and fitness have always been a part of her life.

Over the years, she's tried many different types of workouts: aerobics, home fitness tapes, gym workouts and mind-and-body classes such as yoga and barre. She averages six classes per week at Barre District in Menomonee Falls, which offers an all-ages low-impact fitness routine that blends moves from dance, pilates, yoga and strength training.

Myhra also takes two yoga classes a week at Peace Yoga in Menomonee Falls, where she's been a client for more than 10 years. She



Anita Myhra at Barre District in Menomonee Falls.



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Carol and Karl Ralian of Seniors Helping Seniors.
Photo courtesy of Seniors Helping Seniors.

also dabbles in meditation using a fitness app and looks to Instagram for fitness inspiration.

She finds switching up her routine helps to keep her motivated. “You need to confuse your muscles, otherwise you’re just going through the motions,” she says. “Physical fitness is like an insurance policy.”

Her hope is that continued exercise will help ward off diabetes and other diseases, as well as continue to allow her to age gracefully. “No one is promised tomorrow,” she says.

Myhra doesn’t just work out to increase her fitness levels, though. She also notes that group fitness makes her feel more connected. “I don’t have my work peers [since retiring],” she says. “That was my social interaction.”

With group fitness, she feels that she shares something with others. “When things get rough, you need a way to deal with the stress,” Myhra says. “You need to find a place to escape.”

Seniors Helping Other Seniors

Carol and Karl Ralian have owned Seniors Helping Seniors (seniorcarewaukesha.com), a local business that provides supportive care and assistance to area seniors, for more than 10 years.

Seniors Helping Seniors caregivers provide companionship, along with typical home care services such as light housekeeping, meal prep and transportation. Personal services such as bathing, dressing, grooming and toileting are also offered.

The advantages to employing seniors are numerous, Karl says.

“Our senior caregivers grew up with a different moral compass,” he notes. “They value their jobs and strive to always do their best. They show up for work on time and spend their time interacting and caring for our clients. We focus on hiring caregivers with a medical background, and our number one former profession is registered nurse. We also have a number of LPNs, physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists.”

One additional benefit to hiring senior caregivers to attend to clients close in age leads to friendships between the two. “Our caregivers understand the aging process, as they’re going through it with our clients,” Karl says. “They relate to our clients, as they grew up in similar circumstances.” MKE

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