

LIFESTYLE

A GOOD AGE: Staying fit and strong at 97 is 'a must' for Jo Sharp

Retired nurse works out at Weymouth Club 3 days a week to stay independent

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WEYMOUTH — Over at The Weymouth Club, a dozen or so men and women are working out in the gym at mid-morning.

One stands out in a quiet way.

Josephine "Jo" Sharp appears to be in her 80s. She is diligently going through arm, leg and core strengthening exercises with her certified personal trainer Michele Fay. Sharp is very serious as she raises and lowers her body from a sitting position, pulls down with her arms on some weights, pushes out with her legs and keeps a steady posture while she stands and sits.

"We want to keep her strong," Fay says, as she keeps a hand near Sharp's back. "It's important to her to stay independent and we work on functional movement to keep the muscles she needs."

Sharp will turn 98 in September and this routine is a big part of what keeps her going. She tells you that, her daughter Nancy McGrory affirms it and Steve Goldman, the club's co-owner, swears by it. She is the club's oldest member.

Sharp comes here to work out with her trainer for half an hour, three mornings per week and takes a taxi from her home in Braintree to make sure she gets here.

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The past year has been a trial. During the four-plus months when the club had to close during the state lockdown, Sharp was as restless as could be. She was on the phone at least once a month with Fay asking, "When are you going to open again?"

"When we were able to partially reopen, I think she was the first member to come back," Fay said.

This is not a new habit. The former Quincy City Hospital nurse of 35 years has been coming to the club since she retired at age 67 in 1989. That makes more than 31 years of working out with weights and 20-plus years of tennis.

"My mother was always outgoing and independent and we keep after her to keep coming here," daughter McGrory said. Other younger family members have suggested she take it easy, maybe stop the workouts. But she doesn't listen.

Sharp grew up in South Quincy with three sisters and a brother, and was very active with cousins who lived next door as playmates. She graduated from Quincy High School Class of 1942 and Quincy City Hospital School of Nursing in 1945.

At age 22, she married Herb Sharp who worked in maintenance for the Milton School Department. They raised three children: Alan of Kingston, Nancy of Braintree and Richard, who died in 2002. She worked at the hospital on night shift while her children were young.

Always out and about after she retired, she volunteered at Father Bill's homeless shelter, at the Hingham Food Pantry and the Pine Street Inn, was a federal census worker and has been active in the Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Braintree.

Longevity runs in the family — her mother lived to 87 and three of her four siblings also lived to be 90 or older. Her sister Diana, 92, lives nearby and drives her places now.

Her daughter also lives in Braintree with her family and has been a steady companion and support.

"We are just very grateful to have her here and healthy. It's nice she has a routine," McGrory said.

McGrory was the one who got her mother started on this healthy regimen for the last third of her life. After Herb Sharp died at age 66 in 1987, Jo kept working for another two years and then retired.

As a teacher, McGrory had that next summer off and suggested they join the Weymouth Club together. They worked out together in the gym and tried tennis.

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When school resumed and McGrory was at work, Sharp gave the club a try by herself. She soon met a very friendly and social group of tennis players who met regularly for coffee and tennis and marked one another's birthdays with cakes and cards.

"I'm just thankful I'm healthy enough to do these things," Sharp said. "I've been lucky."

When she finishes a workout now, she is sometimes short of breath and when she gets home, she sits or lays down for half an hour. As age advances, she finds physical therapy exercises to improve her breathing and her balance are helping.

"I do it to keep alive and keep my strength," she said. "You can do it if you put your mind to it."

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