

Program stresses fall prevention for seniors

Moving Grays Harbor

By Maryann Welch

Many people are fortunate to sail through the years without injuries, however, the chance of serious injury and hospitalization increases as we age. Studies show that approximately 1/3 of older adults will fall at least once in a year.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends four approaches to preventing falls: 1) medication review, 2) vision exams, 3) home safety evaluation, and (no surprise here!) 4) regular exercise to improve strength and balance.

In my family I have witnessed several instances of the most dramatic effect falls can have on quality of life – loss of independence. I am happy to report that there are several efforts in Grays Harbor to help address this issue by offering the S.A.I.L. program - Stay Active & Independent for Life.

S.A.I.L. got its start on the Harbor last fall when the Olympic Area Agency on Aging offered local training for instructors. A good response to the training resulted in many local certified teachers. The YMCA was already offering a class tailored for seniors taught by Donna Kulich, a 30-year fitness instructor, and she adapted that class to incorporate the principles of S.A.I.L. The program focuses on aerobics, balance, strength training, flexibility, and education. Some of the activities are performed seated in a chair and Donna stresses that there are

many adaptations for anyone with movement limitations, including those using a wheel chair.

The class at the Y regularly attracts 10-12 people and is offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:45-11:45 am. Donna is currently unable to lead the group; however, the Y is well-equipped with trained instructors. Donna's hope is to get back to the class in October. The class offered at the Y is open to members for free and non-members may purchase a day pass which is \$5 for seniors. Lisa Kless, Fitness Director at the Y, encouraged anyone wanting to test out the program to come on in for free for the first time. Some S.A.I.L. participants also meet at the Y for a 9:30 am walking activity prior to the class.

This spring, the YMCA partnered with the Aberdeen Senior Center to offer a S.A.I.L. class at the Aberdeen Museum. In fact, the Senior Center's Site Coordinator, Barb Huffman, and Activities Director, Lonnie Wild, have both been participating in the classes. "We were both promoting it so hard that we felt like we should put our money where our mouth was" shared Lonnie. Both Barb and Lonnie have worked with seniors for years and have seen first hand the effect that loss of mobility or injuries have on the lives of many people. Lonnie commented that "if my balance is good and muscles are toned there will be less chance of a miss-step or fall". Within a couple of months, Lonnie is pleased to see personal progress in her flexibility.

Grays Harbor Community Hospital also offers a S.A.I.L. class at St. Andrew Church in Aberdeen. I was unable to get detailed information due to vacation schedules and my writing procrastination. There may be others that are providing this program and I'd like to hear from you so the information can be shared in a future column.

In speaking with Donna, Lisa, and Lonnie, they all emphasized the

importance of mobility, strength and balance for anyone hoping to continue performing daily activities that keep them independent – packing in a sack of groceries from the car, emptying the garbage, carrying a teakettle from the stove to the counter. And, just a reminder, other bonuses from exercise of any kind can include: weight loss; improved sleep; increased energy; and a sunnier disposition.

The good news is this program is not necessarily limited to participation by seniors. As I have emphasized many times, it is never too early, or too late, to begin to prepare your body for changes through the years.

I also understand that the current classes are composed of almost all females, but falls and injuries are not gender biased! So men, I encourage you to check it out as well...before you have to tell your friends and family how you broke your wrist/shoulder/hip by tripping over your own feet.

Staying active and independent is certainly a goal of mine – and I hope you all “sail” into your golden years with an exercise regimen that keeps you active and independent as well.

Maryann Welch is a life-long harborite, the retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department, and an avid exercise enthusiast.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.