Bone Builders Cook County – Meeting Covid Challenge

Bone Builders exercise program was developed by researchers at Tufts University, designed to prevent and reverse the signs of osteoporosis in seniors. It is a weight bearing program providing the benefits of increased bone density, muscle strength and improved balance, incorporating an opportunity for socialization. When the Coronavirus Pandemic hit, safety measures initiated by MN Governor Walz in March prevented group gatherings. Here is the story of how one group of volunteer leaders in Cook County were flexible, continuing to provide the opportunity for exercise and socialization so many seniors had come to rely on.

In 2016 Tofte resident, Ginny Cooley, started the first Cook County Bone Builders group. Ginny has been dedicated to and involved in exercise and fitness throughout her life. She has long been working to bring organized exercise to the West End (Schroeder, Tofte, Lutsen). She was drawn to the Bone Builders program because of its focus on providing an exercise opportunity for seniors, which in her area required a 30 mile drive up to Grand Marais. And, she liked the fact that it was free! Ginny asked her friend Nancy Koloski to join her in leading a group at the Birch Grove Community Center in Tofte.

After a few months of healing from a broken ankle (thanks to her friendly, enthusiastic Lab), Lutsen resident, Sharon Hexum-Platzer decided she needed exercise to be a regular part of her life. She started participating in the Bone Builders group at Birch Grove and later trained to be a leader. Sharon soon realized distance was a challenge for many members. She decided to open a second location, initiating one day a week in Lutsen. This was closer for many members and gave all the option to attend either location. When snowbirds return in the summer, both locations often have 12 to 16 participants.

Each Bone Builders leader brings their own personality, strengths and style to the program. Nancy is a meticulous record keeper and has a structured exercise style. Ginny Cooley likes to tell jokes, adding a bit a humor such as saying, “Let’s exercise our ‘baby cows’ now!” for calves. She says she also likes to mix it up and do the counting in different languages. Sharon likes to engage people with questions or comments and likes to vary the routine for brain health and challenge. When these leaders were asked what benefits they noticed from their participation in Bone Builders, their answers varied. Sharon has noticed an improvement in her memory and has lost weight, Ginny says it keeps her attitude positive, while Nancy appreciates how the exercises have strengthened her joints and helped ward off surgery. The West End Bone Builders team now includes a total of eight members who are trained to share in leading classes.

Pre-pandemic, the West End Seniors had the option of attending Bone Builders on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the Birch Grove Community Center in Tofte, and Mondays in the Town Hall in Lutsen. All are free and led by the local volunteer team. When the Coronavirus hit and restrictions for gathering in groups were put in place, Sharon started emailing members short YouTube videos featuring exercises for seniors. Then her cross-fit training daughter encouraged her to try Zoom to keep the exercise and socialization going. Ginny is unable to join Zoom meetings but the Bone Builders team is providing classes via Zoom on Mondays and Thursdays. Ginny, with her endless enthusiasm and many exercise DVDs keeps her exercise habits going. Her numerous Bone Builder friends call her regularly to stay in touch until the group can safely meet in person.

The need for social distancing, wearing masks and restrictions on group gatherings has resulted in isolation, lack of activity and loneliness. We have all felt the negative impact, but it is especially evident among seniors. Meeting via Zoom has been a great option. And it is easy - the current membership ranges in age from their 60's to their 80's and they are all able to navigate the app.

On-line participation has also opened the door to some new positives. The West End leaders have noticed an increase in participation, especially in the winter months. People do not have to take a long, cold drive to participate. Also, members who are snowbirds or are vacationing can still join their friends in Cook County via Zoom from any location - the Twin Cities, Arizona, Colorado or Georgia. The leaders are considering the possibility of incorporating a Zoom option into their regular schedule, even when things return to normal. That will enable them to continue to reach people for whom distance or weather is an issue, whether it be from far up the Caribou Trail or far away in Arizona.

Nationally the Bone Builders program is sponsored by RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) and is a part of AmeriCorps Seniors. Locally, this is under AEOA (Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency). If you would like to become a Bone Builders leader or participant, please call Nancy Koloski at 218-663-0147 or Sharon Hexum-Platzer at 218-663-7305.