

Fairfax Pharmacist Lauds the HEALING POWER OF EXERCISE

Susan Gillen knows firsthand that life can change in a flash. Just two years ago, the Fairfax pharmacist suffered a debilitating fall that put her in a wheelchair. That's when the once-active mother of three knew she faced an uphill battle to regain full mobility.

"The muscles were badly damaged, and I had to learn how to walk all over again" she recalled.

Her left femur and right shoulder were broken. She endured two surgeries and spent 10 days in the hospital followed by three weeks of painful, inpatient rehab and several weeks of outpatient physical therapy. "Then they sent me to Cub Run RECenter to work on the machines," she said.

Aided by a cane, Gillen says she felt intimidated by all the fitness equipment at first, because she had never been to a gym before the accident. She says the RECenter staff and patrons put her at ease.

"People here are very encouraging," she said. "They'd say, 'Susan, you're doing great,' and that's what gave me hope."

Though the progress was slow, Gillen had faith in the healing power of exercise. "I started by riding the stationary bike and using the Cybex machines," she said. "It was a long time before I could start walking on the treadmill really slowly to begin with. I had no stamina then, and I had to build stamina and get my strength back."

Then she headed to the Lazy River in the Cub Run leisure pool. "The Lazy River is awesome," she said enthusiastically. "When you walk in water, you push against the current and it doesn't hurt, and the exercise accelerates healing."

Once Gillen was stronger, she turned to one of Cub Run's certified personal trainers for support. "I wasn't going to push myself because I didn't want to hurt myself," she said. "I did about 10 sessions with the trainer, and I made progress because he pushed me past what I thought I could do on my own."

Consistent exercise eventually enabled Gillen to lose the cane, but she still walked with a limp. Determined to regain full mobility, she turned to the fitness director for guidance, bought a RECenter membership and started adding drop-in fitness classes to her routine. She also gave her diet a makeover by avoiding sugar and processed foods and focusing on a more healthful diet that includes lots of fruits and vegetables. In the last year, she lost 25 lbs. while maintaining her muscle mass and metabolism.

"My energy level has really picked up," she said. "I used to do the fitness classes three days a week. Now I'm up to five days per week. Nothing hurts at all, and I feel stronger than I've felt in 30 years!"

During a recent vacation with her family, Gillen says she had to climb three flights of stairs. When she reached the top, she realized her road to recovery had ended. After two years of hard work and determination, Gillen now walks without a limp.

"I'm grateful for all the people who helped me and encouraged me and prayed for me," she said. "People at the gym have been very kind to me, it's been such a blessing, and now I can encourage others."

