

Buddy System Motivates Fitness Success

Stop into the Lee District RECenter fitness room most any weekday morning, and you're bound to notice a group of fitness buddies shaping up together. At the center of it all is 59-year-old Jeanie Ford, a plain-speaking, former hairdresser who has a knack for motivating others. In addition to her own fitness routine, she finds it rewarding to help others keep moving.

"Dedication, determination and no excuses," has been her mantra since she was in her mid 30s and got serious about her own diet and exercise regimen. "I was tired of being fat," she said with brutal honesty. "I lost 80 lbs. 22 years ago, and I have kept it off."

Once Ford started to see her own fitness results, she encouraged another lady in her apartment complex to join her at the RECenter. Phyllis Weissman, now 78, says having Ford as a fitness buddy during her twice-a-week workouts changed her life.

"If it weren't for her, I don't think I would have lost 60 lbs.; maybe half of that," she said. "In the beginning, I really needed a partner. I had a lot of aches and pains, and I could hardly walk. Now my knees don't hurt, my cardiologist says I have the blood pressure of a 40-year-old and because I lost so much weight, my endocrinologist says I need less medicine to regulate my underactive thyroid."

Studies show that those who work out with a friend, a spouse or a co-worker enjoy the exercise more than if they pumped iron by themselves. You're also less likely to talk yourself out of going to the gym if you know a buddy is expecting you to be there, and the accountability helps you meet your goals more quickly than if you go it alone.

"I think it's vital to have a workout buddy," said Sharon Feltman, 77, who has been friends with Ford for more than a decade. "I've lost more than 50 lbs., and if it hadn't been for Jeanie, I wouldn't have stayed on track."

One of the newest members of the buddy group is Gary Nazelrod, a 71-year-old retired software engineer who became a RECenter member in April. "I saw Jeanie helping other people, and I asked her about it," he recalled. "I wouldn't push myself as much if I were working out by myself, and she keeps me motivated."

For this group, the RECenter is more than just a gym. It's a supportive network of friends that makes fitness fun.

"We all support each other for physical activity and socializing, and it helps to know somebody else cares," Ford said. "We're like a family here. It's like our second home."

RECenters offer fitness options for people of all ages, and memberships go on sale Jan. 1. For details, turn to page 60 in the Fitness section.

