

W O R K O U T C O R N E R

A tiny little swimming pool with a big, welcoming heart

By ELAINE HESSER

FOR NEARLY 50 years, people have been learning to swim and enjoying warm-water exercise about a half-block off of Casa Verde Way in Monterey, where the Josephine Kernes Memorial Pool and its aquatics program began at Edith and Herb Perry's home, in their backyard swimming pool.

Kernes Adaptive Aquatics has been shut down since the beginning of the pandemic, but when it's operational — Executive Director Lynn Young said it should reopen by Aug. 1 — it serves more than 100 clients a week, many of whom have no other way to exercise. They range from young children with physical and/or emotional disabilities, to wounded veterans and senior citizens. Young noted that Covid restrictions may lower that number, however.

Edith, who offered swimming lessons at local beaches and other pools, knew that exercising in warm water would benefit people with disabilities, and she invited them to her small pool. Over the years, the facilities were rebuilt and improved. The pool is now indoors, and the place was named in honor of Edith's mother, who, according to accounts of the pool's history, taught her children the importance of community service.

Who can benefit?

Young, who has worked at the facility for 11 years, said that while it's been closed, it's undergoing some major renovations. The deck around the pool has been covered with soft flooring, for example, and the pool is being resurfaced. Concrete walkways and parking will also be improved, thanks to a grant from the City of Monterey.

Young said there are three groups of clients who use the pool in roughly equal numbers — children with special needs, senior citizens, and adults with disabilities including cerebral palsy and spinal cord injuries.



Clients of all ages and conditions at Kernes Adaptive Aquatics find a "warm, accepting and encouraging" environment to exercise.

"The youngest member we've had was 3 months old, and the oldest was 103 years," Young said. Unlike other local facilities, there are no large classes and no drop-ins. Each person is scheduled for a specific time — usually about an hour long — based on their needs.

Some require one-on-one attention throughout their time in the water, while others can exercise independently. "It doesn't matter what your age or physical ability is. This place is warm, accepting and encouraging," she said.

Scheduling wizard

The schedule is adeptly handled by Linda Gomez, the facility's associate director, who has been there for 13 years. She makes sure that, for example, a child who likes to scream and shout isn't there at the same time as someone with PTSD, or that people who have doctors' appointments during their regular time slots can still find an hour to come in.

And Gomez makes sure the instructors — many

of whom are students in CSUMB's kinesiology department fulfilling their service learning requirements — are there when they're needed, while still leaving them enough time to do homework and study for crucial exams.

"Linda's brilliant," Young said.

The private, easy-to-use showers and dressing rooms are also a draw. Young noted that even during the shutdown, some clients came to use the showers, which were more accessible than what they had in their homes.

South County clients

Kernes Adaptive Aquatics is funded mostly by private contributions and foundations, Young said, with a small amount coming from taxpayer-funded grants, like the one used for the renovations. For another example, the Transportation Agency for Monterey County provides accessible rides to the pool

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HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

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for members from all over Monterey County, some as far south as Soledad. The center also raises money through its annual Splash-a-thon fundraiser.

Although members are asked to pay fees, Young said, "We provide services without regard to income. No one is turned away." Special needs children of active duty service members use the pool, which benefits local military parents, who would otherwise have to travel to San Francisco for similar services.

'Dedicated'

Once people discover the joy of being in the water, they keep coming back — some for decades. "We have young people in their 30s who have been coming since they were toddlers," Young said.

She has story after story of people who have benefited from using the pool. One older adult who spent most of her waking and sleeping hours seated because of her physical condition told Young, "It feels so good not to be in the shape of a chair." The staff

has also successfully accommodated people with oxygen tanks and colostomy bags.

"In 50 years, we've figured out a lot of things. We've never found a single condition or age we couldn't work with," she said.

The executive director said she understands how freeing it is to be in the water, since she fractured her hip and used the pool herself while recovering. "It felt so good not worrying about slipping and falling," she recalled.

Young credited the facility's instructors with a great deal of the center's success. "They are just fantastic. They are the most unbelievable young people — smart, dedicated and compassionate." She said that they are certified by the Aquatic Rehabilitation and Therapy Institute, a nationwide organization that says it's for "health care professionals working in the aquatic environment," and many are also personal trainers. Some get separate certifications to work with children, too.

The relationships that instructors and students have are significant, as everyone learned during the shutdown. "It's very nurturing. People get to know you. They form friendships and spend time chatting. It's a family," Young said.

"It's been so sad — heartbreaking — not having everyone around," she added, and she looks forward to welcoming folks back to the renovated pool. If you'd like to learn more about Kernes Adaptive Aquatics, you can visit their website at kernespool.org. The link for frequently asked questions is particularly helpful.



Instructors work with a wide variety of physical conditions.