

REGION NEWS

HAWAII OR BUST
MIDDLE CHURCH HOME RESIDENTS USE NOVEL CYCLING PROGRAM TO ENHANCE THEIR HEALTH

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SHARE



Winnipegger Peter Janzen is cycling to Hawaii.

He is not doing it on a dare. He is not doing it to set a world record. And he is not doing it to raise awareness or funds for any particular cause.

He is simply doing it for his own health and well-being. And he's doing it without leaving his Winnipeg residence.

Janzen lives in the Middle Church Home of Winnipeg, a personal care home nestled between the Red River and Highway 9 in the municipality of West St. Paul. He has been a resident there for a year and a half, and a member of its Old Spokes Cycling Club since his arrival.

The Old Spokes Club is a group of residents enrolled in a unique physical activity program that takes place in an improvised mini-gym and revolves around three stationary bikes. The bikes are custom-designed to allow wheelchairs and other chairs to be pulled right up to the pedals.

The primary aim of the program is to enhance residents' mobility, motor skills, strength, balance and cardio-vascular fitness, while reducing the progressive decline in daily function that can occur as adults get into their 80s and 90s. The secondary aim of the exercise program is to enhance cognitive and social functioning, self-worth and independence.

"Since I started with the bike I have improved," says the 87-year-old Janzen, who moved into the home as a result of mobility issues. "I come two times a week and it helps me walk. The bike is no trouble."



Residents ????? (left) and ????? (right) get ready to cycle as staff members ??? (left) and ??? (right) look on.

"The exercise is helping him," adds Lydia Janzen, his wife of 62 years. "In the beginning, he couldn't throw his legs on the bed, but now he's able to do that."

Like most of the exercise club's 64 other current participants – including one who is 103-years-old – Janzen spends two 15 minute sessions a week pedaling a bike toward the virtual goal of Hawaii, 6,083 kilometers from Winnipeg.

In the first week of August, the group had already travelled a combined total of 3,459 kilometres towards that destination. That distance is tallied each day by the program's facilitator, Maylene Vergara.

"The program was created to help residents achieve more independence and maintain their mobility," explains Sandy Peers, the home's Director of Nursing Services. "The residents are able to maintain strengths and it helps decrease injuries from falls."

Each year in Winnipeg, one in three adults over 65 years of age experiences a fall and several hundred of them are hospitalized as a result. Many of those who are hospitalized are unable to return to independent living.

Middle Church's program, Peers continues, is a result of the confluence of three separate occurrences – a discontented new resident telling Peers, "all I want to do is ride a bike again;" an in-house survey that indicated that both residents and their families were eager for an exercise program that offered more than walking; and Vergara being hired as the home's rehabilitation aide in 2016.

Vergara had already worked at the home as a health care aide for several years, and was familiar with many of the residents and their needs and capabilities. As the new rehab aide, she was determined to create a fitness program that would simultaneously engage and excite them, improve their fitness levels, and provide them with opportunities to socialize and have fun.

"As we age, our physical activity levels often decrease," Vergara explains, "so our program was created to encourage residents to participate in such programs to facilitate function and independence, maintain mobility and improve quality of life."

It is evident that the warmth, enthusiasm and concern with which Vergara greets and encourages participants every day is valued by all of the club's cyclists and their families, and is a key component in the program's success.

Last year, Vergara's initiative and innovation in creating and maintaining the program were recognized with the 2017 Award of Excellence from the Long Term Care Association of Manitoba. As her nomination letter indicated, "Since Maylene took on the position of resident aide, residents flock to her program."

"The feedback that I receive from the residents and their families is so overwhelmingly positive," Vergara says. "When you see your residents waiting for you early in the morning and lining up to do their exercises, it gives me a sense of fulfillment that I am able to inspire them to become more motivated to improve themselves."



Resident ????? and staff member Maylene Vergara check out ?????????

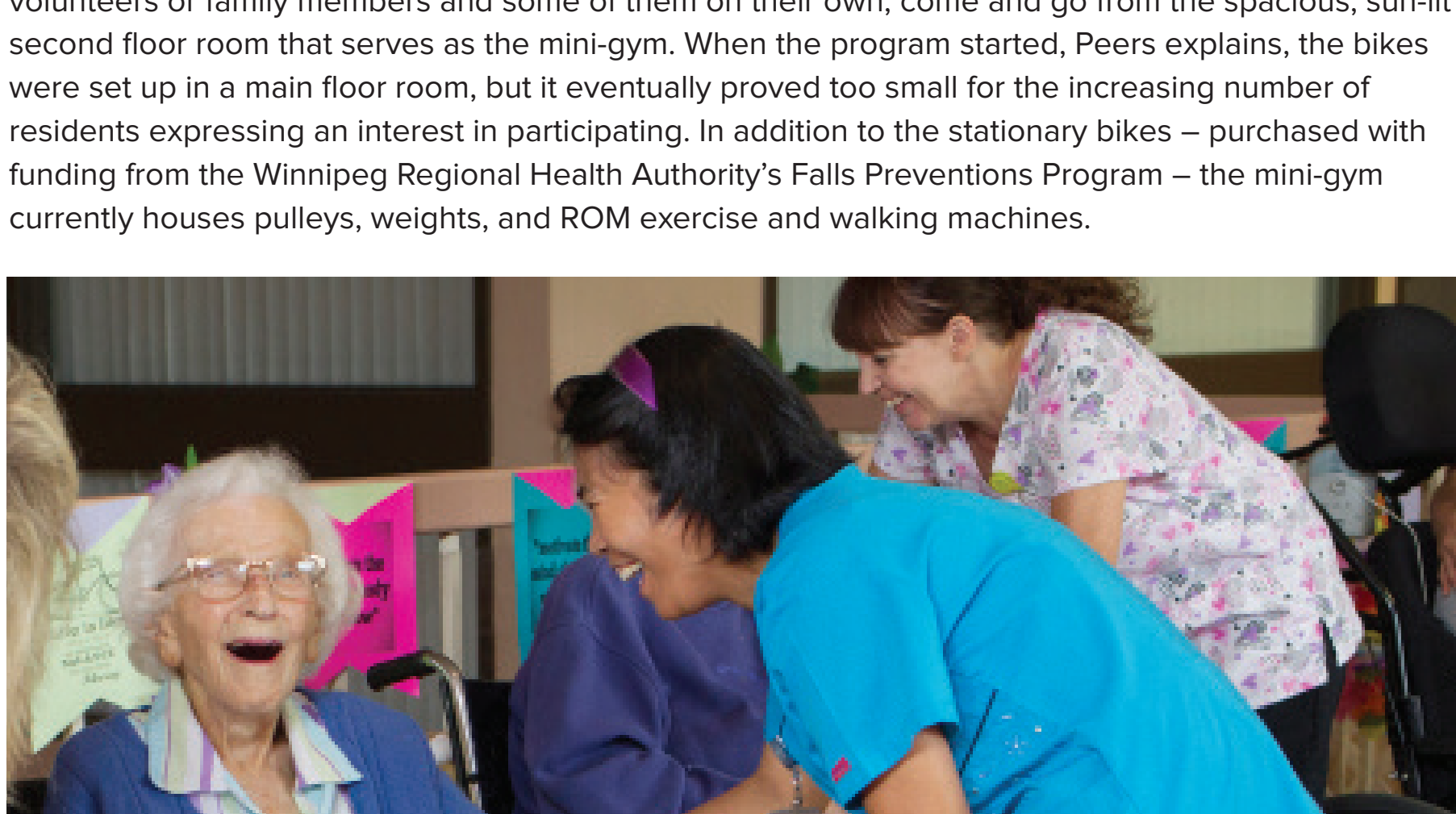
Vergara created the cycling program with the full support of her department and the Middle Church administration, and with the assistance of Community Therapy Services' occupational therapist Rachel Hamm. Hamm regularly visits the home to conduct leisure assessments on residents wanting to participate in the exercise program, and to monitor their progress as they do so.

"Exercise plays a very important role for the elderly," Hamm explains. "It helps them physically to maintain joint range of motion, balance, strength and cardiovascular endurance, and improves respiratory conditions and reduces pain. It (also) helps them recover from injury or illness so that they may return to their regular routines."

Physical activity also benefits mental health.

"It can have a beneficial impact on depression and agitation and has also shown to induce brain neurogenesis which may result in slowing down cognitive decline," Hamm continues. "We have also found that it improves residents' sense of autonomy as they appear to feel a sense of pride in being able to contribute to their own health in a very tangible way and are able to see the beneficial results."

Those benefits are clearly evident as the program's participants, some of them accompanied by volunteers or family members and some of them on their own, come and go from the spacious, sun-lit second floor room that serves as the mini-gym. When the program started, Peers explains, the bikes were set up in a main floor room, but it eventually proved too small for the increasing number of residents expressing an interest in participating. In addition to the stationary bikes – purchased with funding from the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority's Falls Prevention Program – the mini-gym currently houses pulleys, weights, and ROM exercise and walking machines.



Residents ????? (left) and ????? (right) share a moment at Middle Church Home.

"We recently expanded our program to accommodate the maximum number of participants," says Vergara. "Our goal now is to increase the amount of equipment available in our rehab program."

In keeping with the Hawaiian theme, the mini gym is temporarily decorated with leis, cut-out coconuts and other island inspired accoutrements, while signs bearing motivational slogans such as "Today I will love myself enough to exercise," adorn the walls. The island motif recently replaced a large map of Manitoba that was used to encourage program participants to virtually cycle across their home province, intermittently stopping to visit and reminisce about the various towns and cities where they used to live and work.

"Our goal in our program is to keep exercise focused on interesting and fun activities," says Vergara.

As Hank Williams Sr. croons in the background, residents wait patiently to take their turns on the stationary bikes. As they wait, they chat with their family members, volunteers, and one another, and encourage and applaud each other's progress as they pedal towards their shared destination. For those who participate, the gym serves as a town square of sorts, providing them with opportunities to share stories, meet other residents and make friends.

"The room is a gathering place for the residents and they all encourage each other," says Peers. "Resident and family response has been very positive, and families, residents and volunteers approach the department to be involved."

Peter Janzen often arrives early for his scheduled exercise days, excited to get on the bike as soon as he can.

"When May opens the door, I'm here, waiting for her," he says.

"He is first one to go," adds his wife Lydia. "He's a man who always has been on time, and he is the first one to come in in the morning. It's very important to him, and May is wonderful with him."

Ninety-three-year-old Esther Johnson is one of the newest members of the bike club to be inspired by Vergara. Her participation in the program, her sons say, has helped her adjust to her recent transfer to the home and already improved her mobility.

"We can't believe how mom has improved in two months," says Wayne Johnson.

"She does 15 minutes on the bike and travels about two kilometers or more each time," adds her son Ken, "and then May takes her for a walk. We're elated with the staff and the program here."

The Johnson brothers' elation regarding Middle Church's physical fitness program is shared by all of its participants and their appreciative family members, and has given the fitness program a measure of renown across the province. In fact, as word of the program has spread, representatives from other WRHA personal care homes have come out to West St. Paul to see the Old Spokes Club in action and to learn how they can develop similar cycling programs and keep residents engaged.

Ultimately, of course, it will not matter whether those homes decide to have their participants virtually cycle to Dauphin, Palm Springs or some other far-flung destination. What will matter, as Vergara, Peers and the residents at Middle Church know so well, is the actual cycling activity. For it is always the journey that matters more than the destination.

Sharon Chisvin is a Winnipeg writer.

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