



Local Matters.

Centennial Citizen > News

Dancing in the name of fitness



Wilma Erickson, 85, and Rose Marie Labriola, 80, practice their dance moves Feb. 18 at Holly Creek Retirement Community in Centennial. Photo by Courtney Kuhlen | ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com

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In retirement communities across the country, residents have been getting together and playing Nintendo's Wii to improve balance, endurance, range of motion, hand-eye coordination

and sequencing abilities.

But a new game technology has a group of 12 retirees and seniors at Holly Creek Retirement Community tapping their toes and sashaying for fitness.

"I haven't been on a dance floor in probably 40 or 45 years," said Paul Youngren, a 73-year-old resident at Holly Creek. "My grandkids came for Thanksgiving and suggested I do this."

He's referring to DanceTown, a slow motion version of the "Dance Dance Revolution" game that pits players against computer-directed dance steps, designed to stimulate the brain, and enhance physical, mental and emotional health.

Youngren and his 11 cohorts are part of a national study conducted by Humana Health Insurance and the University of Miami to find ways to increase physical activity in the elderly population. It is a pilot study and only three retirement communities in the nation are participating.

Fitness coordinator Rhonda Wolffis meets with Youngren and the participants twice a week for 30 minutes at a time. By the time the study is complete, each person will have danced their way through 24 sessions.

Stepping onto their "dance pads," hands on the rails for support, Youngren and Rosemarie Labriola prepare for a three-minute dance-off to a canned version of ABBA's "Dancing Queen."

Half-way through the song, Wolffis sidles up to Youngren and says, "Paul, they should be singing 'you're a dancing king.'"

Youngren, who's concentrating on connecting his foot with the flashing arrow on his dance pad, merely grins.

"The cognitive benefits are huge," Wolffis said. "It's amazing to me that they are able to make the connection at that age."

Wolffis' oldest participant is 85.

By "connection," she means the ability to watch the moving arrows on the TV screen, and then stomp the coordinating foot on the coordinating arrow. Each correct stomp counts as a point. Each properly executed dance routine bumps you into the next level.

Youngren has danced to 142 songs since he started Dec. 12, and he's perfectly nailed the routines 86 times. Labriola has danced to 177 songs and perfected the moves 108 times.

"At my age I don't want to jump or run," Labriola said. "But I want to keep my balance and not fall down."

The game is supposed to increase concentration, balance and bone density, and according to Wolffis, it is.

According to Labriola, the game causes her to break a sweat, which is affirmed as she begins to fan herself post dance-off. This time around, she and Youngren boogie to "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" from Guys and Dolls.

After each session, Wolffis records heart rates and blood pressure on a series of charts that will be sent back to Humana and the University of Miami. Prior to the study, participants had to complete a series of physical and cognitive tests to measure progress.

Though the study will officially end in March, Wolffis plans to keep DanceTown around for residents' continued use.

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