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Never too late to learn to swim

By Kathryn Godsiff
Correspondent

Nora Ellison walked white-faced and trembling into the Glaze Meadow recreation center at Black Butte Ranch a year ago. It was time for her first swimming lesson. The smiling face of instructor Marti Dale did little to ease her anxiety, but she was determined to learn.

A year later, 83-year-old Ellison swims laps and does core strengthening and stretching exercises twice a week at the pool, with five other women who have dubbed themselves the Silver Fins.

The women range in age from 59 to mid-80s and come from diverse backgrounds. What they have in common is a desire to learn to swim - something that never happened during their childhoods. All of them played on and enjoyed the water, realizing if they ever fell in they could probably stay afloat but wouldn't be able to swim ashore.

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L-R: Karen Atkins, Laurie SantaMaria, Nora Ellison, Janet Lawhun, instructor Marti Dale. Not pictured: Bev Archer and Kirsti Amsberry. *photo by Kathryn Godsiff*

Dale began working at the Glaze Meadow pool last year after the school budget cuts axed her job at the middle school. She's spent her working life teaching physical education and coaching various sports, is a water safety instructor and knows how to teach swimming. One of the students in her hydro-fit class, Karen Atkins, 72, asked for lessons.

"My dad is 105 and he swims every day," she said. She figured it must have merit, but was never comfortable in the water. "I couldn't figure out the breathing," she said.

The director of recreation at Glaze Meadow, Jan Terhaar, gave her blessing for the lessons to begin, and the class grew by word of mouth. In the early days most of the time was spent learning basics and overcoming the fear of putting faces in the water. Now that that issue is overcome, the women are working on their endurance.

Dale develops a personal swim plan for each woman, each session. This gives a direction to the workouts and they are able to keep them for future use. Two of the women head south for the winter and they'll take their

swim plans with them.

Ellison quipped that her sister asked why she was doing this at her age. "It's one thing off my bucket list," she said.

Janet Lawhun, 83, attended Oregon State University in the days when a graduation requirement was a pass on a swim test. She took beginning swimming as a senior, didn't actually pass the test but was allowed to graduate anyway, and spent many exciting hours whitewater rafting during her adult life.

"I used really good life jackets," she said. "I wanted more confidence in water over my head," she added, saying that now she has fun in the water while getting great exercise and improving her technique.

Laurie SantaMaria, the youngest in the class in her late 50s, had taken swimming lessons as a child but wanted to learn how to do it right. She does it for the exercise, with the goal of reaching a mile swum by December.

Atkins glows with the self-confidence she's gained.

"I can do something that younger people can do and I can do it just as well," she said.

She used that new-found confidence to train to walk a marathon, something she recently accomplished.

"We have mastered something," said Atkins, and all the women agree that Dale is instrumental in that accomplishment. "We have the best teacher," said Atkins, a statement that met with a chorus of agreement.

Dale says it is a gift to be teaching the Silver Fins.

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"To see them take on a challenge so late in life is inspiring," she said. "They're very motivated." She added, smiling, that there's also no behavior management issues with these students.

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