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Slowing Down? No, She's Stepping Up!

For 93-year-old Yoshi Kitagawa, wellness includes working out five days a week.

By Chance Gusukuma



PHOTO BY CHANCE GUSUKUMA

When Yoshi Kitagawa first stepped into the small gym space at the Kaimukī-Waiʻālae YMCA six years ago, she used a walker. "She couldn't walk on her own between the exercise machines," says Leslie Sharp, a YMCA healthy lifestyle coach. Flash forward to 2013. Now just short of her 94th birthday, Kitagawa works out five days a week at the Y. The walker? Gone.

Three days a week, Kitagawa, who had knee replacement surgery on both knees, walks briskly for 20 minutes on the treadmill. She then rotates through the pull-down, chest press, sled seated leg press, and abdominal isolator machines. "Yoshi has proven to me that 87 years old is not too late to start exercising," says Sharp. "There's no age that's too late for anybody if they're dedicated and it's something they want to do." Twice a week, Kitagawa, despite never learning to swim, takes aqua tai chi and arthritis classes in the Y pool.

"I've always been a busy person," says Kitagawa, who has five children and two grandsons, explaining how she volunteered at a senior center and pulls weeds in her garden. But she slowed down as she coped with various aches and pains, including the knee surgeries. She was in a wheelchair at one point and depended on the Handi-Van to get from place to place.

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About seven years ago, Kitagawa met Sharp after completing physical therapy for a dislocated shoulder. Now Kitagawa arrives at the Y at 5:30 every weekday morning ready to work out with a dawn patrol of dedicated exercisers that includes 16 other people 90 or older. "I'm not trying to be Mrs. America," she deadpans. "I come so I don't lose my mobility. Exercise really helps.

"I really owe a lot to Leslie," says Kitagawa. "I call her my mother hen, although I'm older than her." Sharp, who has 17 years of experience as a personal trainer, sings Kitagawa's praises right back. "She's an absolute joy because she's stronger and healthier in every way. She's steadier on her feet."

Sharp is proud of the positive vibe among the early morning workout regulars. "It's an amazing group of people," she says. "They're committed to exercise, but they're even more committed because of the community we've built at this Y. Not only do you have people to converse with, you have people who care. When they don't see you, they ask about you. It makes you feel like you're a really important part of the whole."

"I live with gratitude," says Kitagawa. "I am so grateful for what I can do. I couldn't ask for a better place than this YMCA."

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