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**The physical
dimension issue**

Workplace wellness

The whys & hows
of programs for
employees

Bands & balls

Power-packed moves
for the pool

**'Middle management' for
the 50+ adult**

Tools to support healthy
weight management

MSCR's Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program

promotes fitness,
connection and outdoor
adventure

Older adults in Madison, Wisconsin, enjoy a wide range of opportunities to enhance health and wellness through this community recreation program

This article profiles a recipient of the 2013 ICAA Innovators Achievement Award, a category of the Innovators Awards recognizing programs and concepts that advance active aging. Presented in three categories, the annual Innovators Awards honor creativity and excellence in the active-aging industry. They highlight innovations that lead the way, set new standards and make a difference in the lives of older adults.

With its array of cultural, educational and recreational opportunities, the lakefront

city of Madison, Wisconsin, is known for its livability. In 2014, the city ranked number five on Livability.com's 2014 Top 100 Best Places to Live¹ and number eight on *Prevention's* 25 Happiest, Healthiest Cities in America.² Madison School & Community Recreation (MSCR), a department of Madison School District, draws on the city's many features and amenities to provide community recreation opportunities for more than 86,000 residents each year.

"The department offers a variety of programs for all ages including arts and enrichment, adaptive sports, adventure, afterschool programs, boating, fitness, special events, sports, swimming and more,"

Continued on page 44



Walks, hikes, bird-watching and other outdoor activities have brought new participants into MSCR's Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program



MSCR's Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program promotes fitness, connection and outdoor adventure *Continued from page 42*



Participants tackle a ropes/challenge course through the MSCR 50+ Fitness program's Adventure Academy. 'A sense of accomplishment from doing something difficult, challenging or new can carry over into other aspects of life,' comments MSCR's Jean O'Leary

says MSCR Marketing Specialist Nicole Graper. Among them is the MSCR Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program. Aimed at adults ages 50 and over, the program encourages people "to live 'healthier, happier and more productive lives' by participating in affordable, conveniently located, professionally-taught fitness and nutrition programs, and by encouraging independent exercise and learning through outreach programs"³

While MSCR offered classes for older adults in the 1980s, the 50+ Fitness program officially began in 1994 with "a generous donation from local philanthropists Robert and Irwin Goodman," Graper states. "The Madison Rotary Foundation invested the original donation," she explains, "and provides some funding from the earnings annually. The program is an excellent example of a successful public-private partnership."

To learn more about MSCR's 50+ Fitness initiative, the *Journal on Active Aging*[®] recently asked Graper and her colleague Jean O'Leary, MSCR 50+ fitness specialist, to delve into the program and what it brings Madison's older adults.

JAA: Please describe the MSCR Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program.

NG: The 50+ Fitness program offers more than 120 fitness and wellness classes in fall, winter and summer sessions. Fees are affordable for most people and scholarships are available to anyone who needs them. The program includes: aqua classes, functional fitness, yoga, tai chi, fitness walking, strength training, pilates, dance, healthy cooking, tennis, chair fitness, gentle exercise and balance enhancement classes. The latest offerings are the Adventure Academy and I Love Madison! programs.

The 50+ Fitness program has two important strengths. One is that the group-fitness programs are located in neighborhoods throughout Madison. Second, we offer a wide variety of classes for people of all fitness levels, from chair exercises to higher-intensity functional fitness classes.

JAA: What are the 50+ Fitness program's objectives?

JO: The objective of the program is to offer a wide variety of affordable and accessible programs to Madison residents over the age

of 50. The focus of these programs has always been group fitness, with an increasing array of nutrition, education and wellness programs.

JAA: In 2010, MSCR launched a two-year plan to expand the 50+ Fitness program. What was the catalyst for this plan?

JO: We wanted to add an outdoor program focus—something fun and different. We had existing resources that made this idea possible from a management and budget standpoint. Through the school district, we have access to a ropes/challenge course, and MSCR owns canoes and kayaks. Madison has wonderful outdoor opportunities available, and we wanted to capitalize on that. In addition, wait-lists for some of the fitness classes meant that we had to try something different or lose the momentum the program had gained over the years.

JAA: Please describe the new areas of focus added through the two-year plan.

JO: The first focus area was outdoor programming. We called our new program Adventure Academy, and included two-hour learning workshops on the ropes/challenge course, canoeing and kayaking, snowshoeing, hiking, bird-watching, geocaching [a high-tech treasure hunt], and more. I feel strongly that these types of learning experiences add a valuable dimension to older adults' daily life. A sense of accomplishment from doing something difficult, challenging or new can carry over into other aspects of life.

Second, fostering community connections is important for everyone in a given "place." Social isolation faces everyone as they age, and having strong ties to the physical community can help alleviate this sense of detachment. We added a lot of small, easy tours/outings that were available to people in the community, but that our participants could do together. This has been wildly successful. Tours of the local transit system,

Continued on page 46

MSCR's Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program promotes fitness, connection and outdoor adventure *Continued from page 44*



MSCR's 50+ Fitness program takes advantage of opportunities for outdoor recreation in all seasons. Its Adventure Academy offers a snowshoeing workshop that blends physical fitness with outdoor adventure for adults who seek a new challenge

walks in the neighborhood historic district, nature walks in the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, and farm and grocery store tours are now all part of the regular I Love Madison! schedule.

JAA: *How does MSCR develop these offerings and promote them to attract participants?*

JO: In general, programs are developed based on needs in the community—this is important for early program success. We also try to add an educational component to these fun activities—for example, a tour of the effigy mounds comes with a good dose of history, as does the Spring Wildflower Walk. These two dimensions (exer-

cise and education) together make a more attractive program.

NG: To promote offerings, the 50+ Fitness program sends a seasonal brochure three times a year to current participants. The classes are also listed in the MSCR program guide, which is printed and distributed to more than 110,000 Madison residents. Guides are distributed at community centers, schools, senior centers and large-scale community events.

The MSCR website and social media platforms help promote programs. Staff also create advertising news releases, and fliers that are distributed in neighborhoods where programs will be offered.

JAA: *How have community partnerships contributed to these opportunities?*

JO: These partnerships are the basis for a lot of our programming, and have been for the almost 90 years that MSCR has been in operation. As a municipal recreation program, we are embedded in the community mindset and consider community centers, senior centers, the university, schools and neighborhood centers as viable partners. For the I Love Madison! and Adventure Academy programs, we have partnered with local shoe stores, grocery stores, senior centers, and other retail businesses when possible. We partner with different

Continued on page 50

MSCR's Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program promotes fitness, connection and outdoor adventure *Continued from page 46*

departments at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, UW Hospital and Clinics, and the UW–Madison Arboretum, where people always appreciate the learning environment. Madison Parks, the Ice Age Trail Alliance, the local Audubon Society, and many local specialty businesses are good partners to have. When both parties see a benefit of any kind, that partnership has a better chance of thriving.

JAA: *For others who are interested in providing these kinds of programs, what practical support is required (e.g., space, staff, resources, supplies, training, funding, etc.)?*

JO: An open mind is helpful. Looking at community resources as collaborators versus competitors is a factor in the popularity of these two programs. Healthy changes come with these kinds of collaborations, not isolated individual efforts. Use existing staff to support local experts in creating or launching programs. A free kickoff program is helpful to let people see what actually happens in a new program. It alleviates the fear of something unknown. Use the support and educational organizations that are available on the national level. The ICAA, National Council on Aging, National Institutes of Health, and Arthritis Foundation all have valuable educational resources available for use. But these are just a few. There are many local resources that would be useful also.

JAA: *What were MSCR's goals for expanding the 50+ Fitness program? And what results have been seen to date?*

JO: We were not necessarily looking for an increase in participant numbers, but additional opportunities and a new clientele. With an existing strong focus on group fitness, we were bound to attract different people into the program, and we did. There were a lot of new faces, especially in the beginning in Adventure Academy. In fact, we had 300 participants the first two years. We were also interested in getting some people outside in the summer. Since we lack ade-

quate indoor spaces in the summer months, finding some outdoor programs for people to experiment with worked well.

JAA: *All new endeavors encounter challenges. What were some of the challenges experienced with the expanded programming, and how did MSCR address them?*

JO: All of the issues that come along with outdoor programming such as the weather, specialty staffing, and safety concerns had to be dealt with. We are very careful in communicating about weather-related issues (i.e., storms, heat, severe cold) and try to reschedule programs if bad weather interferes. Adequate staffing is a safety issue, so we try to use summer interns, full-time staff and school district staff as much as possible. The canoe/kayak instructor and the ropes/challenge course instructors are school district staff whom we hire to facilitate programs we don't have experience with. Finally, we teach hiking safety, and bike path and pedestrian safety. With this knowledge, people feel more confident in using the parks and outdoor spaces outside of our programs.

JAA: *How has the expanded 50+ Fitness programming helped MSCR advance active aging and overall wellness for older adults in Madison?*

JO: We wanted older adults to be seen as a viable, important part of the community. I Love Madison! provides opportunities to explore the bus system, hike the parks, tour a grocery store, or visit the school district planetarium. Adventure Academy affords a different chance to acquire new skills or to try something fun in a safe but challenging environment. We had several canoes out on a popular lake, a couple of them with 80-somethings testing their paddling skills. We partner with Madison Metro on a short bus ride and tour of the bus facilities to help people get more comfortable with using the bus system. Wouldn't it be great for an older adult to take a short bus ride to a yoga class? 🌀

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Jean O'Leary and Nicole Graper for their help with this article. For information about the MSCR Goodman-Rotary 50+ Fitness program, visit www.mschr.org/our-programs/50-fitness-programs.

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Images courtesy of Madison School & Community Recreation

Developing community recreation programs for adults ages 50-plus: five lessons learned

1. A successful program is not always about numbers. Community recreation programs are enriching experiences for everyone involved.
2. Community recreation programs are slowly becoming public health enhancement programs.
3. The opportunities are tremendous, given the need in the community and the excitement in the market for active-aging programs.
4. Programs can capitalize on the power of group activity for safety, camaraderie and social impact.
5. It is best to start with small, customizable programs that can be modified as time goes on.