

# IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

The weight-room regulars at Hebrew Rehab are leading a quiet rebellion.

Text and photos by Sarah Putnam

**A**RLINE SHAPIRO does her leg lifts slowly and with deliberation. She's been a regular here at Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged's fitness center for three years. When she started, she couldn't get out of a chair. Today, at age eighty-five, she stands up from her wheelchair "just like that." Now, she says, she's working on her new goal. "I keep coming because I want to improve my walking."

Researchers have known for nearly a decade that weight training in old age can improve muscle strength. In one study at Hebrew Rehab, a nursing home in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, Tufts geriatrician Maria Fiatarone demonstrated that elderly people who lifted weights more than doubled their leg strength after only eight weeks. In addition, they also improved in mental functioning and gait speed. A few folks no longer needed walkers. In other words, it's never too late.

That's what brings Arline Shapiro and dozens of others here, every other week-day, beginning at eight in the morning. Some arrive on their own two feet, some use walkers, others are wheeled in by volunteers. Most participants are in their eighties and nineties, but some are battling a hundred.

The place doesn't feel like a typical gym—there's no grunting and groaning, no crash and clang of the metal machines, no hot acrid smell of sweat. Six weight-training machines line the wall, and the four chairs opposite are often occupied by people patiently wait-



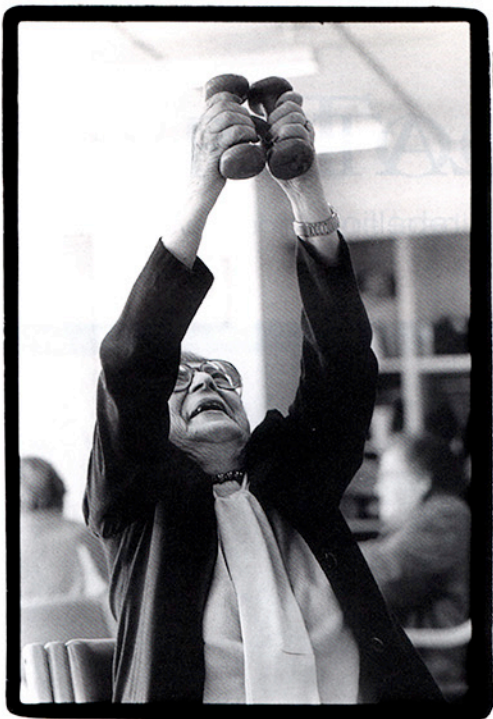
ing their turn. A kind of musical chairs choreography happens as Evelyn O'Neill, coordinator of fitness programming, and two interns help move each participant along to the next machine. Each senior does three rotations of eight counts, with rests in between, on each machine. The settings, though not strenuous, are just enough to demand a little exertion. There's some huffing and puffing, but it's more of a flutter than a real wing-beating.

This is real old age—frailty, wrinkles, translucent skin, thick glasses, and slow, careful movement. People are here because their doctors insisted, because they were scared into it by failing bodies, because a glance into the near future promised increased physical limitations and pain unless they took action, now.

The rewards are gratifying, and almost instant. The seniors who lift weights feel better, sleep better, eat better, walk better, have more energy. Exercise helps them inhabit the present, giving them something measurable and positive in the here and now. For those who refuse to passively accept the encroaching limitations of old age, strength training is an act of rebellion, an affirmative stance. It is a choice to take action, in all senses of the word. ▲

*Sarah Putnam is a freelance photographer and occasional writer who wrote about the Anna Bissomette House, a residence for formerly homeless elders, in the Summer 1999 issue of Hope. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

**Frieda Lilienfeld, 86**  
 I'm eighty-six, but I feel much younger. I feel very youthful. I have been doing the exercises for about a year and a half. I feel tired for the moment, but wonderful later on. It gives me energy to do other things. I do all the exercises and participate in all the activities. I like people very much, so I volunteer here a lot to help out. A lot of people get scared when they first come here—it's a big change in your life—and so I like to help them get settled and feel at home.



**Edward Rosenthal, 94**  
 I've been doing this for at least ten years. I stopped a couple of years ago when I broke a couple of bones in my foot. Then I came back to do a minimum of exercise, just the amount I was able to. I was one of the original ones in the "Fit for Life" program here. Of course I notice the difference. That's why I come down here. The only way you can keep well is by keeping busy. Otherwise you just sit around getting lazy. Right after this I'm going to a program about current affairs. We also have reading and two discussion groups about world events.



**Hal Kaplow, 77**  
 My doctor is on staff here and he recommended me here ten months ago. I hope it would make me stronger, but I'd be satisfied if I maintain where I am, rather than backslide. I guess I'm aware of a slight improvement, but that's not important. I know what would happen if I stopped—my muscles would atrophy.  
 I write lyrics and music (though I'm looking for a better lyricist than me!). I write pop (well, forties kind of pop). So that's what I like to do. That, and explore a more expanded kind of thinking. I hate to use the word spiritual, but... I guess you could say I'm interested in eastern religions without joining any. I'm sort of a Zen Judist, or a Christian Zionist. You're not writing that down, are you?



**Florence Jaffe, 80**  
 I've been doing the exercises with Nellie for almost a year. I love it! I do think my arms have gotten stronger. It's fun to do. Here, we do it in unison, and Nellie is a great leader. I'm a big reader. I read all the good stuff. I like the English writers, especially the Victorians. And I love mysteries. And Margaret Atwood. I put my name on the list to get her latest.