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Joe Gigantino returns athletic club to its community origins

By Marianne L. Hamilton, for Silicon Valley Community Newspapers Posted: 08/01/2011 07:31:46 PM PDT Updated: 08/01/2011 07:31:47 PM PDT

In the hallway outside of the CrossFit cage at Los Gatos Health and Fitness, Holly Westall-Toler sweats and smiles. Her workout clothes are drenched; damp tendrils frame her face.

But Westall-Toler is elated, having survived the previous hour with her trainer, Devin Lopez. During the session Lopez has led his clients through a grueling five circuits, including 200-meter sprints down Main Street, 20 sit-ups, 15 lunges and seemingly endless "burpees."

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(Photo by Tommy LaPorte/for SVCN/July 27, 2011) 81 year old Bob Sturdivent... ( TOMMY LAPORTE )

No wonder Westall-Toler is jubilant.

Now Lopez, a 2005 graduate of Los Gatos High School where he was a member of the Wildcats' football, track and wrestling squads, bids adieu to his class. He's all business. That is, until Westall-Toler, a 1982 Los Gatos High graduate and swim team member, says her good-byes.

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"Great job, Mom," Lopez says, grinning.

"Thanks, honey," she responds, proffering a quick kiss. "See you next week."

At Los Gatos Health and Fitness, generations of families and friends connect daily in pursuit of healthy lifestyles. Thanks to new management, refreshed facilities and a re-energized staff, the community is "rediscovering" this valuable resource in its midst.

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LGH&F was built in the early 1980s by Olympic hammer thrower Ed Burke and his wife, Shirley, who christened it Los Gatos Athletic Club. From the start, the Burkes aimed to create a comfortable, homey environment for the community they served--especially the children.

"There was always a very family-oriented atmosphere here," says Janie Jensen, who joined the club when her daughter Lezlie (LGHS class of '88, where she starred in track and field and earned a place in the high school hall of fame) was a freshman. "Most of our kids went to Los Gatos High School, and you always knew that if they weren't at school, they were here. Ed especially encouraged them to be here at lunch."

Burke's attitude led to the sale of memberships to many of the town's longest-term residents, most of whom had kids in the Los Gatos school system. To this day, the average morning finds former Los Gatos-Monte Sereno police captain Duino Giordano sharing the cardio room

with Rosemarie Flick, mother of real estate developer Dave Flick. In the weight room, Fisher Middle School principal Lisa Fraser pumps iron, while Los Gatos New Millennium Foundation treasurer Eric Childs does a CrossFit workout across the hall. On Court 1, Richard Jones, former owner of Richard's Natural Foods, and his trio of teammates are usually engaged in boisterous play.

"There's a comfort to the club," says Childs, who was one of its first members. "You see the same people all the time. Sharon [executive director of the Los Gatos Community Foundation] and I joined as a couple before we got married. Then when the kids were old enough, they'd come with us."

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"I used to go to my store at 5 a.m. and turn on the soups, come here and play racquetball for two hours, and then go to work," Jones recalls. "I really enjoy it here; these guys I play with are awesome."

Admittedly, for a time following Burke's decision to get out of the day-to-day management of the club, such fond assessments were in decline. Wishing to spend more time with his own family, Burke leased the building to Dr. Mike Nichols, owner of the former Tempus Clinic on N. Santa Cruz Avenue.

"Dr. Nichols is a visionary; I understood his concept," says Joe Gigantino, who bought the club in 2009. "But you can't take a small community club and try to convert it into something else."

Nichols attempted to institute a new, medically based model, with comprehensive testing and assessments. Within months, members were heading over to Courtside or the Jewish Community Center.

Meanwhile, Gigantino, who had played football at Fresno State while working at health clubs and earning a degree in business, was beginning to acquire and convert small racquetball facilities into fitness clubs. Following Gigantino's purchase of buildings in Gilroy and Milpitas, and his development of a club in Shanghai, Burke accepted his offer to assume ownership of the Los Gatos site.

"I think Ed agreed because I said I wanted to take care of the people here, and bring back those who'd left," Gigantino explains. "When I started talking to members, they all said they were looking for someone who cared about the place and wouldn't try to change everything. They wanted their club back."

Gigantino took ownership of the club in September 2009, just as the economy was imploding. Still, he managed to pour some \$300,000 into building renovations and new equipment, adding CrossFit, refurbishing the aerobics room, outfitting a spinning area, bringing in nutrition counseling, adding a full slate of exercise classes and more. Most importantly, he impressed upon his staff the necessity to "carry on the tradition: family, fun and fitness."

All of which, it would appear, now suits the members just fine. Many say the small communities that have sprung up through years of working out together, communities once again supported by Gigantino and his management team, are back and flourishing.

Sipping coffee in the lobby after the 8 a.m. yoga class, Jensen exchanges news with her fellow "Breakfast Club" members. Linda Toeniskoetter, an artist, community volunteer and the wife of real estate developer/philanthropist Chuck Toeniskoetter, has just led the class, and now relaxes with her friends. Originally the group bonded in sunrise salutations; decades later their connections have become deep and lasting.

Says Toeniskoetter, "I started bringing food and having breakfast after my class, then gradually a few others joined me and it sort of grew from there. There is so much wisdom in this group; I think of us as being like Wikipedia. If you want to know something, one of us will be able to help "... whether it's the best restaurant or the best cancer treatment. It runs the gamut."

At various times the club-within-the-club now includes Los Gatans Jean Gize, an artist and retired school teacher who is authoring a book about her experiences as a Japanese internment camp survivor; theater director Megs Booker; Donna Bolger, who's in property management; Jackie Seymour, a nurse, engineer and chemist; Robin Strothers, who has worked the front desk since the Burkes first opened the facility; and Grace Fleming, a Japanese storyteller and hypnotherapist who frequently arrives on her unicycle. Jensen, who was the first woman to complete the San Jose Police Department's academy and the department's first female sergeant, is now retired after a long career in human resources management.

"I do love our group," Gize says. "We have laughed, cried, celebrated and rejoiced with each other, through serious illnesses, divorces, separations, hospitalizations, coping with ill and aging parents, and all other imaginable problems and joys. We are blessed to have these relationships."

Tom Dion, who joins Jones in thrice-weekly racquetball contests, agrees that his club connections have enriched his life. A Navy vet and electrical engineer, Dion hits the courts at 6 a.m. with UC-Santa Cruz director of internal audits Barry Long, and Les Goldman, retired after 40 years teaching in the San Jose Unified School District.

"In many ways these games are the highlight of my week; I really look forward to playing with these guys," Dion reports. "I laugh more here than I do anywhere else."

"People ask me why I come down here at 6, when I'm retired. It's because it's so much fun," says Goldman. "You laugh a lot, you sweat a little bit, and you don't think about the other stuff."

Next door, 83-year-old Bob King, a former meteorologist, serves a fast one to Bob Sturdivant, 81, who was the planning director for Santa Clara County prior to his retirement. The pair met in 1952, when both were serving in the Air Force; now they chase each other around the court twice a week. Wayne Dawson, a Marine who saw action on Iwo Jima and during the Korean War, often joins in for a game of cutthroat. The trio then showers and heads upstairs for coffee and conversation, meeting up with Sturdivant's wife, Shirley (a former tour director who celebrated her 82nd birthday in May by sky diving).

Racquetball devotees aren't the club's only early birds: By 6 a.m. trainers Angela Pizzella and Chris Eagen are settled in for one-on-one sessions with their clients. Three mornings a week Pizzella squats beside Jay Glasscock, coaching him through a challenging routine.

"Working out in the morning is definitely the way to jumpstart your day," Pizzella says. "Trainers help people who need accountability and motivation, and someone to work out with."

Though shaky from the series of "plank" poses he's just completed, Glasscock, who is president of cell analysis for BD Biosciences, suffers from no such lack of motivation. "Angela's relentless," Glasscock says, laughing. "But she's always asking me how I'm feeling or if anything hurts. She's very observant, and she's great at helping me improve my form."

Since Glasscock's travel schedule often trumps his morning workout, Pizzella has crafted a regimen he can stick to in hotel rooms. Glasscock says the results have been dramatic. "I'm able to wear pants I couldn't put on six months ago. Also, since I'm hunched over a computer all day, Angela has really focused on pulling my shoulders back. I'm definitely starting to feel the difference."

Los Gatos-Monte Sereno Police Chief Scott Seaman credits CrossFit with the sleeker fit of his uniform, and enjoys touching base with all LGH&F members during his visits.

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"This gym has always been welcoming and comfortable; a place I can easily get to during the workday to unplug and reinvigorate," he says. "I have now seen how relevant Crossfit's diverse workout regimen is to a physically demanding job, and to life. The CrossFit community has gotten me re-engaged with fitness in a way that I've never experienced before. I truly look forward to going to the gym now."

Childs, a former triathlete and marathoner, suffered knee problems after years of distance running. He says his CrossFit sessions with Lopez keep his body healthy, and keep him connected to a very special sort of family. "There's not many things I'd get up for, to be someplace at 6 a.m. four days a week. But I like all of the groups here; everyone's super-nice."

Hearing the reports of renewed friendships and a staff that fosters close connections, Gigantino smiles. "Buildings don't talk, equipment doesn't talk, but people do. And everyone loves going to a place where someone will say hello and call you by your first name. I've heard some people say there's not enough 'action' here. OK, that's how we are; we're not going to change."

Another thing Gigantino steadfastly refuses to alter is the cancellation policy he adopted in 1997: Should a member call to report that a recent job layoff precludes his or her ability to cover the monthly fees, Gigantino politely advises the caller that their withdrawal will not be accepted.

"If you've lost your job, you're down and you don't feel good about yourself; that's when you need to work out the most. So we put the fees to zero, the member works out for free, and I eat the cost. But we won't let them quit." Gigantino adds that he has yet to have a single member fail to resume paying the fees as soon as he or she finds employment. "People are always proud when they get new jobs, and they're happy to start paying again."

Even as LGH&F's membership rolls are expanding, Gigantino continues to do outreach to the community. He makes the aerobics room available for meetings, he's hosted the Angelfish synchronized swimming team's recital at the pool and he encourages other locals to inquire about using the club for private events. "I've been blessed to be able to buy these facilities, so when I can help people out with their events I'm happy to do so. Our aerobics room is empty much of the time; why not have your book club or Rotary meeting there? We want people to utilize this space."

In this and many other ways, Gigantino keeps it all in the family.

Los Gatos Health and Fitness is located at 285 E. Main St. More information can be found at [www.losgatosfitness.com](http://www.losgatosfitness.com), or by calling 408.354.5808.

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