

Joanne Fagerstrom spreads gospel of good bone health

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by Constance Garcia-Barrio

The Imp of Irony must have waved its wand at Joanne Fagerstrom's birth. Fagerstrom, 60, physical therapist extraordinaire, had scant interest in exercise as a youngster. "I wasn't an exerciser until my late 20s," she says.

"My biggest activity was getting up to change the record on the turntable. My parents, older sister and I went to museums and plays, not the outdoors," says the native New Yorker, a licensed physical therapist since 1978, "but I wanted to help people live in their bodies in the best way possible."

After Fagerstrom moved to this area in 1980, Valley Green beckoned. "I began jogging on the trails," she says. It turned out that Wissahickon Park offered more than fragrant greenery. She met her future husband, Art Fagerstrom, a civil engineer, while jogging. Fagerstrom worked at Temple University Hospital and Pennsylvania Hospital before the couple's oldest son, Paul, now 29, was born. "Paul had a congenital heart defect that required surgery when he was four days old," she says. "It gave me an appreciation of life's preciousness, and I decided to stay home with him." Fagerstrom has two other sons, Stephen, 28, and Erik, 25, who works at Weavers Way in Mt. Airy. Fagerstrom resumed working in 1992. Six years ago, she had a shock. "I was diagnosed with advanced osteopenia," she says. (Osteopenia is a condition in which bone mineral density is lower than normal. It is considered by many doctors to be a precursor to osteoporosis.)

"Your bones are like a biological bank. You can make deposits in your bone bank until your mid-20s. When I was younger, I didn't get enough exercise, and I smoked, so when I reached my bone peak, I already had somewhat of a deficit. Unfortunately, you can't go back and change that."

The diagnosis was providential in a way. Fagerstrom experienced firsthand difficulties that patients with thinning bones face. "Some information was confusing, but I understood the vital role of exercise," she emphasizes. "That said, not all exercise is created equal when it comes to building stronger bones. For example, sit-ups can be dangerous because they may cause compression fractures in a weakened spine."

Osteopenia or osteoporosis stirs up the fear factor, and medication may seem the easiest solution, but Fagerstrom urges patients to weigh the pros and cons of popping pills. Medications may have side effects. For example, an uncommon but serious possible side effect is osteonecrosis (a severe bone disease that affects the jaws), which can cause teeth to fall out, Fagerstrom notes.

"I would never tell patients to avoid medication because it may be the most practical choice or their last resort, but I would urge them to consider a multi-faceted approach that also looks at nutrition, stress reduction and site-specific exercises," says the former Mt. Airy resident. (The Fagerstroms lived in Mt. Airy from 1985 to 1993. Now they live in Erdenheim.)

Fagerstrom healed from osteopenia and had a normal Dexascan in 2011. A changing healthcare climate meant another challenge. Fagerstrom felt pressured not only to limit how long she spent with patients in the clinic, but also to see more patients daily. The constraints pushed her to start her own practice, Mindful Physical Therapy.



Joanne Fagerstrom, who offers weekly group classes at the Center on the Hill in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, will also offer a free mini-workshop on bone health starting at 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 7, at Summit Presbyterian Church, 6757 Westview St. in West Mt. Airy.

“It was a frightening step, a huge leap of faith, but Art gave me his full support.” A friend who knew that Fagerstrom was considering a solo practice gave her a t-shirt showing a woman on the edge of a cliff. Below her were the words, “Leap, and the net will appear.”

That gift made her cry. On her own for three years now, she has flourished. “I can practice the way I need to,” says Fagerstrom, who’s also a Feldenkrais practitioner. She specializes in treating osteoporosis, chronic pain and orthopedic problems. In hour-long sessions, she works with patients one-on-one to develop a comprehensive treatment plan and help them reach their goals.

Responding to a wider need, Fagerstrom offers Super Bones, weekly group classes at the Center on the Hill in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave. “The class focuses on evidence-based, safe exercises which improve strength, flexibility, posture, balance and body awareness,” she says.

“Taking Charge of Your Bone Health,” a one-day public workshop offered annually, provides an in-depth look at how a variety of factors affect bone health. Fagerstrom and her events partner, Shelly Zeichner are offering their next workshop April 18 at People’s Light and Theatre in Malvern.

Even with her classes and research, Fagerstrom finds time for family activities and hobbies. She enjoys scrapbooking and working in her garden. “My husband, our sons and I all like to hike,” she adds. “Years ago, we decided we would try to climb the highest mountain in each state. We’ve done 29 so far, including many of the western states and all of New England.” But she bows out of climbs that require ropes and gear. “That’s beyond me, but Art and the boys have their sights on them!”

*FemFest, a Weavers Way event honoring International Women’s Day, will include Fagerstrom’s free mini-workshop on bone health starting at 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 7, at Summit Presbyterian Church, 6757 Westview St. More information at **267-432-1795** or www.joannefagerstrom.com.*

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