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Ageless energy to spare

Experts say keeping fit is key as population grows older

By GIOVANNA FABIANO, STAFF WRITER

Ask William Dimond how he is feeling and he will say it depends on which yardstick he's using. Now that he's reached the big 9-8, he measures his health a little differently. "If you asked me how I was feeling at 72, I would have said 'terrible,'" Dimond said recently, sitting on the bench at Fair Lawn Lanes after a few practice balls. "If you asked me at 85, I would have said, 'eh,'" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "But if you ask me today at 98, I can't complain," and a wide smile appeared across his face.

The Census Bureau predicts that the number of people 85 and older will nearly quadruple to almost 21 million by 2050. With an aging population comes the need for additional senior services, nursing facilities and age-restricted housing. But as more seniors live longer, experts predict more will be able to be independent, like Dimond. The key to longevity is keeping fit.

Dimond not only lives on his own in a modest Wayne apartment, he drives himself to the supermarket, the golf course, the YMHA -- for a few laps around the pool -- and of course, the bowling alley. Not bad for someone who will hit the century mark in two years. But Dimond is still in the minority. While those 85 and older are the fastest-growing segment of a population that just recently topped the 300 million mark, only one in 20 is still fully mobile. At the B'nai B'rith Bowling League, which meets every Monday night at Fair Lawn Lanes, a few of the old-timers, as they jokingly call themselves, regularly tie on bowling shoes. A mild-mannered retired textile worker who is quick to smile, Dimond sports a 134 average. But he shows up "mostly for the camaraderie," he said. When he marches into the bowling alley one week after Yom Kippur, members rush to pat him on the back, shake his hand and wish him a friendly, "Happy New Year, buddy."

"I like to play with a nice group that isn't too critical of your abilities," Dimond said. "You don't want to be with people who berate you at every bad play."

Although keeping busy, maintaining ties with friends and family and staying fit are important, genetics also play a role in a person's health.

“ We do know that exercise certainly enhances the quality of life for the elderly, and it's very important to stay fit, said Dr. Harvey Gross, an Englewood Hospital physician certified in geriatrics. "We can't change how long we're going to live but we can improve the quality of our lives before we develop problems at the end of our lives, ” said Gross.

Following Dimond in maturity are Henry Liebman, a retired salesman who looks far younger than his 92 years, and Ernest Kaufman, whom the other two call "the baby." Kaufman is 84. "Everybody loves these guys. They've beat me more than a few times," said Steven Margulies, the 37-year-old treasurer of the league. So what are their secrets? Liebman preaches an "everything in moderation" lifestyle. He eats well, sleeps well, and exercises, but he's quick to point out that he doesn't overdo it. When he began bowling regularly 45 years ago, he discovered the sport perfectly suited his lifestyle. "It's a nice sport. It keeps you busy and it's not too tiring," said Liebman, who has a 155 bowling average. "I started watching it on television and I realized it's all about the rhythm," he said. Kaufman has a business-like approach. As league secretary for 47 years, he keeps busy making sure all 12, four-man teams have paid their dues and are ready to play on time. He was president of the International B'nai B'rith Bowling Association in 1981 and still maintains decades worth of records for the association. And then there's Carnig Shenloogian of North Bergen, who bowls regularly with an Armenian church league. He'll turn 95 next month. Shenloogian and his 3 grandchildren have made Thursday night at Bowler City in Hackensack a weekly, can't-miss date. Though their grandfather averages 140, he recently bowled a 203.

"We played two games last night and he beat me twice," said his grandson, Ara Khorazian. After two straight wins, Shenloogian proceeded to have a little fun with his grandson, yelling, "See, stick with me and I'll show you how it's done."

No magic bullet

Scientists have been trying for years to determine if there is a genetic link to life spans, but data have been elusive.

“ Genetics play a role, but we can't quantify it yet. We see people with bad genes and terrible family history who live long, healthy lives, ” said Gross.

John Owens, an orthopedic surgeon with a focus on sports medicine at Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck, said recent studies have shown that attention to detail in both mental and physical health play a larger role than genetics. "I always tell my patients that it's important to set physical fitness goals," said Owens. "Low impact exercise is best, but in the end it's got to be something they find fun."

Liebman said he enjoys the little things in life: a good night's sleep, a healthy meal and occasionally, a dance with his wife. Every morning when he wakes up, he mimics the action of launching a bowling ball down a lane as part of his exercise routine. "In the end, I just lift up and hope the ball goes where I want it to," he said.

As for Dimond, he believes he inherited his mother's genes. She lived to be 92. His father passed away suddenly at 39. But when asked about his secret to longevity, he flashed a wry smile. "I'm scared to tell you," he began, shyly averting his eyes. "I still smoke everyday and I don't go to bed without a cocktail," he said, laughing heartily.