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Mundelein man becomes fitness trainer at 80

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A retired college professor, Burton Fischman of Mundelein earned his certification as a physical fitness trainer at age 80 and is bringing his youthful and energetic demeanor to Vernon Hills High School.

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By Burt Constable

This column is supposed to be about how Mundelein's Burton Fischman earned his certification as a professional fitness trainer at age 80 and now is teaching a fitness class at Vernon Hills High School. That's admirable and inspiring and all that, but there is so much more to this guy's life.

Fischman had a career as a distinguished college English professor with master's and doctorate degrees. His basement office and library boast plaques from his peers at Bryant University in Smithfield, R.I., several teaching awards, heartfelt presents from students and the grave rubbings from the final resting place of Mr. and Mrs. William Shakespeare. So you're thinking maybe he's a tad bookish, perhaps even nerdy.

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But Fischman survived the devastating death of his only son in a car crash at 17, a heart attack, cancer, years of teaching middle school and has been married to the love of his life, Rhoda, for 52 years, so there's a strength and perseverance aspect to his personality. He's also the founder of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs' Leadership Development Institute, and has given countless speeches about leadership.

Then you find out that he's a classically trained pianist who loves to play jazz and has done so professionally.

"Everybody I knew was in show business. They were all musicians or comedians," says Fischman, who grew up in Hillside, N.J., the son of a hardworking father and a mother with chutzpah. The Fischmans might have had some lean years but they still managed to keep the family's grand piano.

By the time he was a teenager, Fischman turned his piano talent into one of the greatest summer jobs a kid could ever have. He played at clubs and resorts in the Catskills during the golden age of that vacation mecca with comics such as Jerry Lewis, Jackie Mason and Henny Youngman.

"I just started out playing the piano, but I heard all these guys and they were so funny, so I started writing things down, and the next thing, I became the emcee," says Fischman, who remembers taking over a gig from Buddy Hackett at the Swan Lake Inn.

By the time he was married and teaching middle-school English, Fischman had earned his master's degree but needed more than his \$3,000-a-year salary to pay for his doctorate. So he supplemented his income by falling back on his musical skills.

"I played piano in a strip club," says Fischman, who was dubbed "The Professor" when he accompanied the disrobing talent at the FEI (For Every Individual) Club in Rhode Island. He completed his doctoral degree and graded papers at night, worked the Sunday shift at the strip club and was back teaching school on Monday morning.

"I don't know how I did it," says Fischman, who gives much of the credit to his wife, Rhoda, who worked as a dental hygienist and kept the family strong.

The couple retired to Mundelein to be close to one of their two daughters and their three grandchildren. After his heart attack and bout with prostate cancer, Fischman read an article about octogenarians who were certified physical fitness instructors, and decided that he wanted to do that.

"Two years ago, I had no idea one muscle from another," Fischman says, as he points to an anatomy chart with more than 600 muscles he learned.

"He has an insatiable desire to learn, which gives him an ability to live young," says trainer Brenda Zagula, his mentor and owner of Living Well Physical Therapy in Libertyville.

"I hired him on his passion, knowledge, experience and strong, strong desire to share with the community," says Buzz Perry, director of community education for Libertyville-Vernon Hills Area School District District 128. "He's so energetic, so passionate."

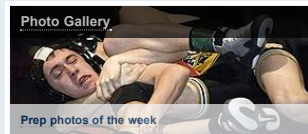
To sign up for Fischman's "Living Stronger Exercise Program," which costs \$45 and runs from 6:30-7:30 p.m. Wednesdays from Feb. 2 through March 16, visit www.comed128.org or phone (847) 932-2176.

"I found the way to really regain your strength is to help someone else," Fischman says.

I have no doubt his class will be fun and helpful. And maybe his next class will teach folks how to play piano for strippers.

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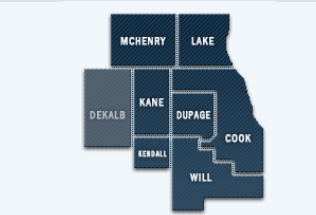
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