Dick Hansen, left, and Dave Eckert exercise in their Menlo Park living room on July 28 during a virtual cardiac fitness class offered by HeartFit for Life. The program, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, pivoted from in-person classes at its gym at Cubberley Community Center to Zoom classes in members’ homes in early March. Photo by Magali Gauthier.

After 50 years in a gym, cardiac program pivots to Zoom

HeartFit brings exercising – and nurses – into members’ homes

**by Chris Kenrick**

With its roster of older, medically fragile clients, the cardiac-wellness program HeartFit for Life shuttered its Cubberley Community Center gym early in the COVID-19 crisis in early March – a full week before Santa Clara County officials ordered the broad stay-at-home order.

But knowing that regular, medically supervised exercise is, literally, a lifeline for many cardiac patients, HeartFit managers scrambled to resurrect some of their offerings via Zoom. Within a week of the Cubberley closure, the program was up and running online.

HeartFit members soon were dancing, stretching and sweating within their own bedrooms, family rooms and living rooms, led by instructors on Zoom and observed by nurses monitoring participants in each session.

HeartFit members, who typically are referred to the program by their physicians, live with a wide range of heart conditions, including high blood pressure, arrhythmias, heart failure, diabetes, stroke risk, history of heart attack or heart surgery, angioplasty or stent placement.

Founded in 1970 as a local YMCA program, HeartFit was among the first medically supervised cardiac-rehabilitation programs in the country aimed at helping those with heart conditions reverse their symptoms.

The program’s quick pivot to remote – but still medically supervised – exercise has yielded lessons large and small, said HeartFit Director Robin Wedell, a registered nurse and member of the Preventive Cardiovascular Nurses Association.

The new normal has pros and cons, but in any case, the post-pandemic future will not look the same as the pre-pandemic past, she said.

For one thing, Wedell has embraced a telemedicine program that now allows her to enroll new heart patients to the program remotely from anywhere in the world. Even when she’s able to reopen the gym safely, Wedell plans to extend the remote option to people who prefer it.

“I had always wanted to offer a hybrid approach because there are some people who can’t do the brick and mortar,” she said. “Now our hand was forced (by COVID-19). Ultimately it will be great because I’ll have a full menu to offer, and if people want to do it remotely, they can.”

Longtime HeartFit members say they love the convenience of exercising from home but sorely miss the in-person camaraderie of the Cubberley gym experience.

“I love getting up and walking in the living room and doing Zoom — and not having to get in my car and drive through downtown-Palo Alto morning-rush-hour traffic to get to Cubberley,” Menlo Park resident Dave Eckert said.

The convenience has led Eckert, 63, to boost his HeartFit participation from three to five times per week.

He and his husband, 79-year-old Dick Hansen, exercise together.

“I push some coffee tables out of the way and our living room is big enough that we just do it together,” Eckert said.

Hansen, a program member since he had a heart attack 15 years ago, credits his continued existence to HeartFit.

“I feel I’m alive today because of this. I’m in much better health than I’ve ever been in my life,” Hansen said.

Palo Alto resident Elizabeth Wolf enjoys walking to her bedroom and logging onto Zoom five mornings a week.

“It’s better for me,” Wolf, 88, said. “I don’t have to take my car, which I think is very important. I think I’m working harder. Katie (the exercise leader) makes it fun. And my blood pressure is much better now, probably because I’m not just racing around all the time.”

Even so, the convenience of Zoom cannot compensate for the missed benefits of in-person class in the gym, many members said.

“It’s definitely much better to be in class because one of the benefits is that you chat with other people (continued on page 16)

The digital drop-off

Some seniors shy away from Zoom, virtual classes

**by Chris Kenrick**

Before their south Palo Alto gym shut down due to COVID-19, about 185 heart patients were regularly attending medically supervised exercise classes in the cardiac wellness program HeartFit for Life.

With the program now pivoting from in-person classes to virtual ones on Zoom, only about 90 members are still attending, HeartFit Executive Director Robin Wedell said.

About 40 to 50 former gym-goers have left the program altogether, even though Wedell said she’s offered technical help to people having difficulty with Zoom. Another 40 or 50 HeartFit members — while not attending the Zoom classes — continue to pay dues and likely will return once the gym re-opens, she added.

A similar digital drop-off has occurred in other local programs serving seniors.

At Avenidas, Tracy McCloud, director of the agency’s downtown Palo Alto location, said online classes are operating between 60% to 100% of their pre-pandemic, in-person enrollments.

“The main reason people have given me for not participating is that they don’t ‘do Zoom,’” McCloud said in an email. “They have the technology; they understand how to do it, but they just prefer not to.”

In some cases, instructors themselves are reluctant to host their classes on Zoom because they lack the necessary equipment, are uncomfortable teaching online or — in the case of fitness classes — worry that people will get hurt, McCloud said.

On the other hand, some Avenidas classes and clubs have “well over 100% of their previous enrollment simply because people have the time to participate,” she said.

Pinki Fung, who manages the Avenidas Chinese Community Center at Cubberley, said about 15% of previous participants have chosen not to engage digitally but that her program has grown by 20% because of newcomers from places like Sacramento, Los Angeles and Vancouver, Canada.

Reasons for nonparticipation include not wanting to deal with the technology, Fung said. Others said they are living in multi-generational households and worry they would slow down internet speeds for other family members, such as grandchildren attending college online.

At HeartFit for Life, one long-time participant who has not converted to Zoom said she was “not up to snuff on the technology — how to get the computer working so you can be a part of that.”

But even if she mastered the technology, Zoom participation would be impossible because her husband uses their computer room during the hours of her Zoom class, she said.

“Some people just prefer to do their own exercise right now,” HeartFit director Wedell said. ■