



Elizabeth Repasky , 86, enjoys swimming most days at the break of dawn—and misses it when she doesn't.

--Photo courtesy of Rebecca Wright.

Swimming a good way to get some exercise



Who do you think would be a better swimmer: a 23-year-old or an 86-year-old? If the 23-year-old was me and the 86-year-old was my grandmother, I would put money on the 86-year-old!

In my defense, I haven't been in a pool since last summer. On the other hand, my grandmother, Elizabeth Repasky, is swimming laps at the YMCA by 5:30 a.m. several times per week. What is her motivation? Let's find out.

In 1996, Grandma injured her back while she was caring for my grandfather who was ill. After his death, Grandma was still experiencing a lot of back pain but nothing seemed to help. Then one day my Aunt Nancy asked her if she wanted to join her at the local YMCA to start swimming. My grandma replied, "I'm not putting on a bathing suit!" As it turned out, Grandma did put on that bathing suit and starting swimming frequently at the age of 74.

Grandma became a regular at the local YMCA. She began by taking a water therapy class and before she knew it had become a member of the swim team. At her first swim meet in 1997, she swam the 50 yard backstroke. In 1999, her Master Swim Team Women's

Relay was awarded Sportswomen Team of the Year by the YWCA of Westmoreland County.

While Grandma is no longer on a swim team, she consistently works out at the pool two to four days most weeks. She swims about a half mile per workout, some days more, some days less, depending on her mood. Her favorite stroke is the backstroke and she likes to use flippers. At the same time that my grandma swims in the morning, there are also swimmers from many other professions that swim alongside her and they refer to themselves as "the early morning swimmers." She enjoys the socialization. Sometimes she swims with my Aunt Nancy and her two daughters, Mary and Laura, who are all excellent swimmers. She continues to display her skills at family events, including front somersaults off the diving board!

I was very curious as to what motivates Grandma to keep swimming, especially at 5:30 in the morning. When I asked her, she told me that she actually wakes up at 3:30, makes a cup of coffee and a piece of toast, pretends that she is having room service, and then talks herself into getting ready. She confessed that she doesn't want to go every time but that she is happier when she does. Grandma uses her time in the pool to think about various projects that she wants to do; the one that she is working on now is writing a book of family memories.

When I asked my grandma about what advice she would give to others about swimming, she replied, "Tell everybody that you know who is hurting to get into the water. It's a miracle!" She also told me that when she doesn't go swimming, she feels like a different person and can't wait to get back into her normal routine. I am always inspired by my grandma's seemingly endless energy. I hope that sharing her story will inspire some of you as well. I must admit that not only does she beat me at swimming; she also plays a mean game of ping pong!

Staying active can lead to many "Healthier Tomorrows". Remember, check with your doctor before you begin an exercise program.

This column was written by Rebecca Wright, student intern for the Center for Healthy Aging. For more information on this article, please call 412-624-3217. The Center for Healthy Aging is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information, contact David J. Fetterman, community outreach coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit www.healthyaging.pitt.edu .