



The 60 Strong ambassadors were chosen by a panel of judges who were looking for people between ages 60 and 70 to inspire peers to be more active. Connected Senior Care Advantage, which is a collaboration from Austin Regional Clinic and Premier Physicians, created the program. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]

60 Strong program showcases what Central Texans in their 60s are doing in fitness

By Nicole Villalpando

Posted Jan 30, 2019 at 5:47 PM

Updated Jan 30, 2019 at 5:47 PM

Some ambassadors were nominated by their children, others by their doctors, and still others nominated themselves.

The 60 Strong program was created to inspire people older than 60 to take care of their health and is the brain child of Agilon Health, which worked locally with Austin Regional Clinic and Premier Physicians to create Connected Senior Care Advantage.

More than 100 people applied to be one of the 60 Strong ambassadors for Austin. A dozen people were chosen from a panel of judges that included former American-Statesman fitness writer Pam LeBlanc and well-known TV news anchors Sally Hernandez and Judy Maggio. The applicants had to be in their 60s and willing to share their fitness and health stories with the public.

The selected ambassadors climb mountains, practice Pilates and yoga, run marathons, are triathletes, do mixed martial arts and CrossFit, and more.



Shelley Friend, 63, takes two classes a day in yoga, strength training and Pilates. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]



Ben Barlin, 61, climbs mountains and coaches soccer. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]



Susan Mobley, 68, makes running and diabetes work for her. She's one of 12 60 Strong ambassadors for Connected Senior Care Advantage from Austin Regional Clinic and Premier Physicians. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]



Mike Gassaway, 68, is a stuntman for movies such as the new "Top Gun." [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]

The ambassadors are featured in a calendar and will be at health fairs and other appearances to be examples of what 60 and beyond can be.

Dr. Kevin Spencer, the medical director of Connected Senior Care Advantage and chairman of the board at Premier Physicians, says the goal was to take better care of seniors as well as encourage them to become more active, but they needed examples of what your 60s and 70s could be, he says. "Being in your 60s and 70s can be the best season in your life," he says. "These are inspiring stories."

"You use it or lose it," says Miriam Raviv, 68, about her healthy body. She has spent the last 20 years preparing for and competing in triathlons. She estimates she's done about 100. She and other ambassadors joke that the competition is getting slimmer with each year.

"People are shocked when they learn I swim, bike and run," she says. "I think there are a lot of stereotypes about aging."

Shelley Friend, 63, says some of the last socially acceptable jokes are the "little old lady jokes." They are really not funny, she says. She's made a point of having a mentor who is older than her and being a mentor to people younger than her. "Age isn't relevant," she says. "Your contributions are relevant." She does Pilates, yoga and strength training to help her stay strong. Having people expecting her to show up for classes keeps her going.

She says she knows she might not be the best yogi in class, but her competition is herself: "How can I be better at something every day?"

"You can be as young as you want to be," says Mike Gassaway, 68. He hits the gym regularly and works out so he can work as a stuntman. Recently he's been on the set of the new "Top Gun" movie and "John Wick: Chapter 3."

Even on days when he doesn't really want to go to the gym, he does. "You might have a bad day," he says, but "it's a (expletive) good life."

That attitude has kept many of the ambassadors going even when their own health gave them challenges.

Ben Barlin, 61, has survived both colon cancer and kidney cancer. In 2017, when he was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer, he says his relationship with his doctor saved his life. His doctor kept pushing him to have more tests when a previous test revealed Barlin was anemic.

After four months of treatment, he climbed to the top of Aconcagua in the Andes, one of the seven summits. "I cried like a baby," he says. He has plans for Everest and to complete all seven summits by age 65.

Cancer played a big role in Kim Cousins' life, but it wasn't her own. Both of her parents and many other family members died from cancer.

Cousins, 62, is fueled by their stories and the drive to continue playing tennis and teach kids in schools about fitness. "Neither one of my parents lived to the age of 60," she says. "I wanted to grow up to just be 60."

She is recovering from hip surgery, but she's not letting that stop her from exercising and getting back on the tennis courts. "You don't quit," she says. "You keep going."

Cousins, Gassaway and Barlin all have recovered from major orthopedic surgery. They make sure their doctors know that returning to fitness activities is important to them. Barlin says when he broke his fibia and tibia in a mixed martial arts match, he wanted to have the plate that held the bones together removed after healing so he could return to the ring. The doctor told him he was too old to do that; Barlin got a new doctor.

Many of the 60 Strong have been athletic their whole lives, but for Lisa Kurek, 62, the loss of her daughter Sophia, 23, in an accident more than four years ago made her start really exercising. She walked into CrossFit South Lamar and found a support network and encouragement that helped her keep living after that loss. "CrossFit got me to realize how strong I was," she says.

She shares her values through the tattoos on her arm, which started as a way to remember her daughter. One is a compass and represents four principles she wants to live by: grace, discipline, gratitude and passion.

That carries her through when she doesn't want to go to the gym at 6:30 a.m.

Susan Mobley, 68, runs marathons around the world. She makes it fun by rewarding herself with leggings with wild patterns or references to pop culture such as "Game of Thrones." "I'm trying to be present and not hiding," she says. As she runs by in her vibrant pants, people cheer her on.

Mobley runs for herself, but she's also running for other people. The shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 had a big effect on her. She wears a bracelet she had made that has the names and ages of all the kids and adults who died there: 26, one for every mile of a marathon. When she's running a marathon, she dedicates each mile to a different victim.



Miriam Raviv, 68, is a triathlete. She is one of 12 60 Strong ambassadors from Connected Senior Care Advantage from Austin Regional Clinic and Premier Physicians. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]



Kim Cousins, 62, is a former tennis professional and has been teaching kids how to be active for years. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]



Lisa Kurek, 62, is one of the 60 Strong ambassadors from Connected Senior Care Advantage, which was created by Austin Regional Clinic and Premier Family Physicians. She started doing CrossFit after her daughter died. [Contributed by Connected Senior Care Advantage.]

The ambassadors all have advice for their peers about how to get more fitness in their lives.

“Get busy living,” Cousins says.

Or put another way: “Get your (expletive) in gear,” Barlin says.

Raviv encourages baby steps and to begin showing up.

Mobley suggests exercising with a friend.

Kurek says to think about, “What am I going to do today?”

You have to find your people, the group that you want to work out with who will make it fun, she says.

Gassaway likens the gym of today to the barbershop of yesteryear. It’s where you come together with your community to talk sports and politics and what’s going on with the guys.

“You look forward to it,” he says.

One of the things that connects these ambassadors is the way they look at life. Cousins says she can’t live her life like the cup is half empty; she has to see it as half full.

And while some of their peers talk only about their health problems, this group talks about all the things they get to do, the things they can do and the things they look forward to doing in the future.

Spencer says that’s the difference between the ambassadors and some of his patients who go to the gym but don’t really want to. The ambassadors, he says, “are running to something.” They see exercise as positive and not punishment.