

A Creative Spark that Shows No Sign of Dimming

By Jennifer Davis, May 2020



Life's journey is full of twists and turns. Nothing stays the same forever. However, there is one constant on which we can depend – we never get too old to dream, think, and do. And mobility is often key to actualizing our dreams.

That's where a program like [A Matter of Balance \(MOB\)](#) comes in. Loss of balance that results in a fall is often the catalyst that leads to immobility in older people. With age, a fall can be quite a traumatic event. Injury can require an extended period of rehabilitation resulting in muscle loss and weakness. Those who have suffered a fall often curtail their activity out of fear of falling again, which only encourages further weakness. In fact, fear of falling actually contributes to the likelihood of a subsequent fall. MOB is designed specifically to help participants combat that fear and learn ways to stay active, while staying safe.

Dianne's Story

You could call Dianne a “poster child” for the MOB program. At 74 she still has way too much to do and has no plans to curtail her activity. A registered architect, creativity is deeply encoded in her DNA. She spent her adult life building a career and raising a family in the big sky country of the Midwest where she was an avid vegetable gardener, stocking her freezer with fresh produce and her pantry with canned delicacies.

Around five years ago she moved to Massachusetts to be closer to her daughter. She lives independently in a multi-level condominium where she has continued her love of gardening, albeit on a greatly reduced scale. “My children love that I garden on my deck because we can't have in-ground gardens in my condominium complex. I call it my pot garden, and of course, the grandchildren just think that's hysterical,” says Dianne.

She also channels her creativity through painting and crafts, and during the current Covid-19 lock down, has stayed connected to her grandchildren by providing virtual art classes for them.

“My son-in-law was able to get all of my grandchildren and me, here and in Chicago, on a Zoom conference call for an arts and crafts lesson,” says Dianne. “I call the classes ‘Grandma's Attic.’ I have always done arts and crafts with my grandchildren when I saw them in person, and this has allowed that to continue from a distance.

I told them about making May Baskets when I was their ages, and then we made some. We added curled strips of paper, pieces of gift wrap ribbon, and stickers in lieu of flowers. One of the boys put cough drops in his (instead of candy or cookies), then everyone had to add something really silly to the

baskets they made. When I reflected on it later, I thought maybe the cough drops were more appropriate in this age of virus.”

A Fall that Gave her Pause

Dianne suffered a fall and serious injury when she first moved into her condo. She recalls, “I fell when I was moving in and broke both of my wrists. It was a rough deal. My daughter and son-in-law rushed me to the hospital. I also have mitral valve stenosis, a condition that causes a heart valve to get stuck, so that slowed things down.”

Dianne goes on to say, “I needed surgery for my broken wrists, and the doctor had to insert plates and pins. But thanks to the care I got, I haven’t developed arthritis – my wrists work great. My fall had a good outcome, but I had to live with my daughter and son-in-law for two months instead of the two weeks we expected. My grandchildren thought it was funny to watch me try and eat, but I was determined that I was not going to have them feed me. My daughter would cut up my food in teeny little bites, and I would just kind of shovel it in.”

Although Dianne does not currently report a particular concern with her balance, she does admit that she experiences vertigo. “After two and a half months of therapy following my fall, I developed vertigo, which I’ve experienced before – it’s not something new. It comes and goes, and I have to watch it. After my fall and rehab, I felt my balance was off for a while. And as I get older, I realize it’s going to become a bigger issue,” says Dianne.

Dianne credits MOB with helping her build awareness about what she can do to maintain her balance and how to negotiate her environment to prevent falls.

She describes her experience with the program. “I became more mindful of things that cause falls. It’s something we all have to be aware of, and I found the class was wonderful because we were taught simple exercises that I can do even with my valve condition.

They were simple stretching exercises that still kept me moving. And you could feel the difference it made. In fact, one of the other women who took the class commented to me that she’s been sitting around a lot during the Covid-19 quarantine, and can really feel it. And I thought yeah – that’s what happens. So, I suggested she take out the workbook we received as part of the program and do some of the balance exercises again. I find that they continue to be helpful for me.”

Dianne describes the MOB coaches in glowing terms. “When we were first introduced to the exercises, a lot of us had to sit down or just stand there for a little bit because we couldn’t do all of them, she says. But during the next session the coaches had geared them back to reflect what we were capable of doing, and then started building from there in the next class. I was impressed that we didn’t have to say anything – they picked up on the needs of individual participants right away.”

Dianne also appreciates the socialization that MOB promotes. “In a lot of ways, the program was a social thing,” she says. “It was a little bit of exercise, a lot of socialization and thinking about what I can do at home to make things easier for me. We used a workbook with questions to think about at home between sessions and then talked about them in the next class. We found ourselves giving helpful suggestions to each other. We shared things that were working, things that were problems, and ways to address the problems.”

She adds, “There was a wide range in terms of functionality among the participants. Some people were quite capable of performing all of the exercises and contributed quite a lot. Some were struggling a little more physically and had more questions than ideas. But that was fine because we all learned from it. The coaches watched and picked up on clues people provided and made sure issues that hadn’t been resolved by the end of the class were addressed in the next session. They were very tuned into the group, and that doesn’t always happen in classes.”

With an eye toward the future, Dianne says, “I want to continue to live each day to the fullest, which means living as independently as I can for as long as I can. To do that I need to take care of myself - physically and mentally. For personal reasons and a sense of fulfillment I need to continue to contribute what I can to others and to remain involved in my family and in my community. I also want to remain as independent for as long as possible to ease the burden on my children.”

Dianne took the MOB class at her local senior center where she is a volunteer and board member. The class was cut short by two weeks because of the Covid-19 lockdown. Despite social distancing, Dianne finds plenty of ways to stay involved.

“My daughter is a pediatrician, and the doctors in the clinic where she works were running out of gowns, so I made gowns for the doctors,” she says. “They have to take them home and wash them every night but at least they have something they can use.”

And that’s on top of her virtual art classes and craft projects. Dianne shows little sign of slowing down – after all gardening season will soon be in full swing.

A Matter of Balance is an example of the evidence-based programs supported by [Elder Services of Merrimack Valley and North Shore’s Healthy Living Center of Excellence](#), which means their benefit has been proven or informed by research and evaluation. These programs are designed to promote healthy aging among older people.

Recruiting and training MOB trainers has been made possible in part by a [grant](#) from [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation](#). Funding of regional trainings began in September of 2018. Since then, 38 additional Master Trainers in MOB have been trained, for a total of 76 new program practitioners, coaches and master trainers in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine.