



### **The Garratt Wellness Centre: No Ordinary Fitness Centre, No Ordinary Results**

At first glance, it seems like an ordinary fitness centre. People are stretching on exercise mats, riding stationary bikes, running on treadmills, and lifting weights. Music is playing. An instructor circulates around the room, offering encouraging words and health tips... it all seems very much like an ordinary day at any ordinary gym.

Yet from the start there are signs that the Garratt Wellness Centre is no ordinary fitness centre. The location is a departure from the fitness centre formula that predicts gyms on busy street corners, fronted by window displays of rows of sweaty urbanites pedaling and running in place. Instead, the centre is located in a small and unassuming former elementary school in the heart of a subdivision in Richmond, and the fitness rooms overlook an idyllic green grass field bordered by trees. In another radical departure from the average gym's floor plan, a good chunk of the centre's real estate is occupied by a large, professionally-equipped teaching kitchen, with room for small groups to learn how to cook healthy meals. Still got a question about nutrition? Ask the professional dietician who works at the Garratt Wellness Centre alongside a legion of other health professionals. What other fitness centre's staff roster includes a physiotherapist, music therapist, respiratory therapist and a host of community nurses? This is definitely not run-of-the mill fitness centre fare – so if not a gym, what exactly is the Garratt Wellness Centre trying to be?

The Garratt Wellness Centre is a “one stop shop” for people of all ages living with chronic health conditions like diabetes and heart disease that provides a “seamless continuum of service from diagnosis to self-management”, explains Alison Dennis of the City of Richmond. The idea was to move diabetes and cardiac rehabilitation and education services into the community where people live, so that they are accessible on a daily basis.

The Centre is a multifaceted and precedent-setting partnership between two usually distinct spheres of government and the community. The Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (Richmond Health Services), a part of the provincial government's health domain, administers day-to-day operations, while the City of Richmond, a municipal government, provides the building. Community partners such as Canadian Diabetes Association, University of Victoria Centre for Aging, and local neighbourhood residents have joined the Steering Committee to provide programming input and feedback. Using the expanded chronic care model as a starting point to advance the vision of making Richmond “the healthiest city in Canada”, the partners leveraged support from the B.C. Ministry of Health's Health Transition Fund to open the Garratt Wellness Centre's doors in September 2004.

“We're focusing on pulling programs together that will support people with skill development around managing or preventing chronic disease,” explains Barb Leslie, the centre's Project Coordinator. To that end, the centre offers a Heart Wellness Program and a Diabetes Physical Activity and Education Program, both of which incorporate education segments into each exercise class. The goal is to encourage regular exercise while supporting participants in becoming informed, educated and activated in self-managing their chronic disease. Participants develop skills and resources to better manage their health. In the case of the diabetes group, participants measure their blood sugar before and after class, track their eating and exercise habits more closely, actively participate in health decisions with their physicians and healthcare providers and develop networks of support in their community.

In a very short time, the centre has had a significant impact on the lives of its members. “From a practitioner's perspective, we're definitely seeing functional improvements,” says Alison Dennis.

"People are increasing their quality of life, length of life, and the length of time they're living independent lives." Instructor Margaret Dragu agrees. "When you talk to people, you're going to hear dramatic stories of weight loss and decreases in the use of medications."

The stories of group members prove her point. The seemingly ordinary people diligently working out on the treadmills, stationary bikes and exercise maps have surmounted the most extraordinary health hurdles: heart attacks, multiple critical surgeries including bypasses and pacemakers, diabetes, kidney failure, and coexisting chronic conditions. Inspirational stories of survival and improved health abound.

Alfred is seventy-five years old and became a member of the Heart Wellness group after having a valve replacement and receiving a pacemaker. Since joining the group, he's exercising regularly, watching his diet very closely and says "I've got more energy." Bill Pruden has congestive heart failure and diabetes, and since becoming a regular at the Garratt Wellness Centre, has lost an astonishing eighty pounds, reducing his weight from a starting point of 320 pounds to his current weight of 240 pounds. Their families – and their doctors – are delighted with the gains made. It is a story of "life or death," says Antonio, age seventy-one, "I wanted to live. Hallelujah!"

And then there is Pamela J., who joined the Diabetes exercise group in April 2005, at the age of seventy-seven. Administrators, group members and instructors alike buzz with enthusiasm when talking about the famed Pamela J. "Have you talked to P.J.? You really have to talk to P.J." "Oh you've got to talk to P.J." "You know who you should talk to? P.J. She's amazing – the poster child for the Garratt Wellness Centre."

While the people around her are astonished by her gains, Pamela J. is modest. "Well that's very nice," she says of the accolades. "But I don't see what is so amazing. For the first few sessions, I stood on the treadmill looking out the window. It wasn't even turned on." Margaret, the instructor, encouraged her to use the treadmill, but "There was no damn way!" exclaims Pamela J. "My legs don't work well, you see, so I would watch the other treadmill belts moving and be simply terrified."

"I made it to the point where I stood on the treadmill, with my legs on each side of the belt while it moved very, very slowly. And that was being very brave. One day, I got extraordinarily brave, put my feet very gently on the moving treadmill, and started walking. I then got it going just a smidgen faster. When I finished, I thought, wow! that was something."

"A few sessions later, I was walking for more than ten minutes at a very fast pace. And this was amazing, you see, because my legs don't work very well. The treadmill forced my legs backward and forward, and as a result, I was soon able to walk a fair distance and go shopping with my walker, when previously I was using my scooter."

If that achievement was not stunning enough, Pamela J. also saw a dramatic drop in her blood sugar levels. Before most classes, her sugar levels would be between ten and twelve (the target range is less than seven). After exercising in class, her blood sugar levels usually drop three to four points.

There is also the social benefit. "I haven't missed a day in a year," says Bill Pruden of the Heart Wellness Group. "I enjoy coming here...the people here keep me motivated," says Lorne Laukkonen, who joined the Diabetes group this year. David, who is part of the Diabetes group, agrees. "I wouldn't have done it on my own. The group keeps me accountable, and I really like everyone here. The group and the instructors are really great." Pamela J. also enjoys the Diabetes group just as much as the group enjoys her. "I sing, I lark about, and flirt outrageously with the men."

While a formal evaluation of the Garratt Wellness Centre is currently underway, the overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants and physicians is one of the ways that

coordinator Barb Leslie measures the centre's success. "Participants are encouraging new participants to join or referring them to other services at the centre. One will say to the other: have you seen the dietician? Let's go ask her that question. Or they'll refer people they know into the programs. From a business perspective, building good word-of-mouth referrals is the best measure of success."

Members of the Garratt Wellness Centre agree. They are so convinced of the benefits of its programs that despite one member, Norman, jokingly describing the stretching class as "absolute abject agony" ("I'm just not built to bend that way," he explains), the Diabetes group is pushing the centre to add a third fitness and education session each week.

The demand for 'more' is yet another indicator that the Garratt Wellness Centre is a unique health service model successfully inspiring improved health outcomes. After all, how many of us leave our fitness centres – if we use them at all – wanting and lobbying for more time there?