

NO SIGN OF SLOWING DOWN WOMAN, 94, DEDICATED TO WORKOUTS POCA RESIDENT, SON HIT GYM FIVE TIMES A WEEK FOR AT LEAST 45 MINUTES

Publication: CHARLESTON DAILY MAIL

Published: Monday, August 16, 2010

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See video of Helen

Lee at the gym

Helen Lee firmly grips the handles of the rowing machine with both hands as she wiggles her small, white Easy Spirit sneakers onto the feet stirrups.

She takes a deep breath and pulls her elbows back by her sides, her hands to her midsection.

For Lee, a 94-year-old Poca resident, rowing at the gym not only keeps her in shape but it also brings back old memories.

During World War II, from 1942 to 1945, Lee rowed a boat across the Kanawha River from **Nitro** to St. Albans to retrieve groceries for her husband and four children.

Her eldest son Samuel Lee Jr., rowing on the machine next to her, remembers his mother teaching him how to row.

"I was 10 years old at that time and I then began to row my siblings and her to the grocery store across that big river without any life preservers," Samuel explains. "Big steamboats would come down the river and the waves were rocking the boat."

Lee and Samuel joined the Nautilus Fitness Center in Cross Lanes nearly 12 years ago, after Samuel had open-heart surgery in 1999. The two travel to the gym five days a week to work out for at least 45 minutes.

Lee does a series of 13 strength-building machines to build her leg, shoulder, bicep and tricep muscles. She also does core exercises and 20 minutes of cardio, splitting her time between the treadmill and the rowing machine. Lee said fellow exercisers comment on her strength.

"They come up and say I'm an inspiration to them," Lee said. "But I go because it makes me feel good and my son goes and he doesn't like to go by himself."

A native of Montcoal, Lee moved to St. Albans her senior year of high school. In 1933, she graduated salutatorian from St. Albans High School and is one of two still alive from the graduating class.

"Orville Smith is still living; he is 96," Lee said. "I am the only girl from the class still alive."

Lee has been teaching Sunday school since she was 17, beginning at the First Baptist Church of St. Albans. She now teaches the adult women's class at First Baptist Church of **Nitro**.

In 1934, Lee married Samuel Franklin Lee Sr. She had her son Samuel at age 19.

The Lees had three more children including Joan Lee Douglas, 71; Joyce Lee McClanahan, 67; and Dr. David Lee, who died in a construction accident in 1996.

David was an oncologist who started chemotherapy and radiation in Charleston. The David Lee Outpatient Cancer Center, an ambulatory care department at Charleston Area Medical Center, is named after him.

Lee has 12 grandchildren, nine of whom are doctors, and 23 great-grandchildren.

Her husband worked full-time as a shift worker at Union Carbide for 40 years.

In 1940, he purchased seven acres from his grandfather's 40-acre farm, located under the St. Albans/**Nitro** Bridge and six years later began to build houses with his family's help.

By 1960, the Lees had constructed 22 houses in a subdivision still standing named Helen's Court.

"I worked on them just like he did," Lee said. "I have put down a lot of flooring; I have finished a lot of flooring and I unloaded a heck of a lot of block.

"They didn't used to come and dump the block like they do today - they didn't have the equipment," Lee said. "So they came and parked the truck and you got up on the truck and unloaded them. I would get right up on the truck and help them unload them. I didn't want to stand there and wait; it took too long."

In 1968, Lee and her husband purchased 55 acres of property in Poca, splitting 10 acres for each child.

In 1972, Samuel Lee Sr. died at the age of 82.

"I got tender care," Lee said. "My husband was very kind to me and took very good care of me. I miss him like the dickens."

Her eldest daughter Joan Douglas, a retired counselor from South Charleston High School, built her house across from her parents' the same year her father died.

Douglas estimates there are nearly 20 family members living on the land with the youngest being 8 years old and Lee being the oldest.

"Not many people are so lucky to have all this land and see your grandchildren grow up around you," Lee said. "They were beautiful and I took care of them even when they had measles and whooping cough."

Douglas said her mother has tutored all of the grandchildren and great grandchildren through the years.

"I'm sure they are where they are today because of her," Douglas said.

Samuel, a retired principal from Hayes Junior High School, calls his mother an "unbelievable person."

"She is extremely intelligent, very gifted, passionate, religious and cares about others," Samuel said. "She has been to school with all of her grandchildren and now she is very involved with all the great grandchildren."

Lee has been helping her 17-year-old great grandson, Zachary Douglas, with his history, English, math and science homework since he was in the second grade. As an avid reader herself, she recently assigned Zachary Emily Bronte's gothic novel "Wuthering Heights" as his summer reading.

"That's one thing that is mandatory in my vocab is to do summer reading," Lee said.

In addition to educating her family, she loves to cook for them.

Several times a week, her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren enjoy dinners that include lima, green, pinto or white beans, red potatoes, baked potatoes, salad, ham, cornbread, wieners and sauerkraut, pork chops, coleslaw, chicken breast or homemade spaghetti.

Lee also makes sure to make their favorite desserts too, whipping up what they call "goop," a concoction of chopped apples, pineapples and bananas in Cool Whip. She is also known for her fruit pies, including lemon, apple, pumpkin, strawberry, peach and cherry.

"I'm not a big eater of sweets," Lee said. "The best sweet in the world is those cream horns from Spring

Hill Bakery, and I like the Krispy Kreme doughnuts too. I don't keep them around because they're dangerous."

In the mornings, Lee enjoys fresh grapes on her Cheerios, corn flakes or bran flakes with Vitamin D milk.

"The rest of the family has skim milk; they're always on a diet," Lee said. "I'm never on a diet. I have weighed the same for probably 40 years."

Lee said she has kept her weight around 130 pounds her entire life. She credits her good health to drinking plenty of water, eating a balanced diet, getting plenty of sleep and staying active.

"I think the best thing is to watch your diet and get at least eight hours of sleep if you possibly can. Sleep is a necessity," Lee said.

Andrew Hendric, 35, has been a fitness trainer at Cross Lanes' Nautilus for three years. He said Lee's dedication and energy level has never wavered over the years.

"It's unbelievable - she has not slowed down a bit," Hendric said. "I sometimes help her out with the machines but we don't really need to too much. She has it all down. She has a nice routine and sticks with it."

Douglas said her mother is very strong for her age. At the gym earlier this month, Douglas hopped on a machine after her mother had just finished it only to find she could not lift the weight Lee was lifting on the seated leg press.

"She had it on 140 pounds," Douglas said. "I had to take it down to 100. I couldn't believe she was doing that, but she was just pumping away."

Lee said she does not let age hold her back.

"You feel just as old as you think you are, and I don't think I'm old," Lee said. "I just don't think about age. I just go and do what I can and if that time comes when I can't do it, I won't do it. I will just go in that lounge chair and go to sleep."

With a positive outlook on life, Lee said she hopes she has many years ahead of her but she prefers to take things day to day.

"Life is beautiful," Lee said. "You have to make it that way though. You can make it ugly if you want to. I could sit around and cry all day because I'm 94 years old, but I don't. I praise the Lord that I am 94, and just as long as I can get up and walk I'm going to get on the way."

LEANN ARTHUR/FOR THE DAILY MAIL

Helen Lee, 94, works her arms on a standing weight machine at the Cross Lanes Nautilus. While Lee uses a variety of weight machines, she said her favorite is the rowing machine.

Lee exercises on a rowing machine with her son, Samuel Lee. The two started working out together after Samuel had open-heart surgery. They usually work out five days a week.