

Nitza training with Sherrin

TELLING our STORY

Discovering Family, Health
and Wellness at the JCC

A few years ago, during one of the coldest and snowiest winters in decades, Nitza Harpaz unexpectedly required major back surgery. After her initial convalescence, her doctors recommended that she take long daily walks as part of her post-surgical therapy. But given the ice and snow, where was she going to walk? Outdoors was out of the question and the mall was a hassle to get to and not really appealing to her. And that's when she had a Eureka moment. She'd walk at the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades - the place where she and her husband Giora had been coming to do pretty much everything for the past 32 years.

“Whenever we're not working, Giora and I are at the JCC, attending cultural events and film screenings and working out in the amazing gym,” says Nitza. “So when I needed to find a place to help me in my recovery, the JCC was the first and only place to cross my mind.”

I started going every day and walked the downstairs halls from one end to the other. Then I'd go upstairs and walk those halls, where I got to enjoy all the all the artwork on display. And when I was done with that, I'd walk down to the music school. I'd rest there and listen to the talented students as they practiced and prepared for concerts. And some days, as I passed the auditorium, I'd get lucky and catch a dance recital or hear a choral practice."

In all the years she had been coming to the J, it wasn't until she began walking the building that Nitza fully realized that the JCC was an amazing world onto itself. There was something incredible happening in every nook and cranny and after she was at her new routine for a few months, people began to recognize and speak to her. They heard her story and went out of their way to encourage her. And that's when yet another unbelievable thing about the JCC presented itself.

"When I came on particularly cold or snowy days, the JCC maintenance crew would meet me outside and shovel the pathway so I wouldn't risk a fall. The Early Childhood teachers, who passed me in the halls with all their adorable school children in tow, got to know me as well, and they stopped to encourage me all the time. In fact, one sweet teacher even left me a card at the front desk expressing how proud she was of my determination and progress. The director of the dance school, who often saw me on my daily rounds, offered to let me use the dance studio, so I could stretch at the barre as part of my therapy. And when I finished my walks and stopped at the JCC café for a hot cup of coffee, the nice guys behind the counter would draw hearts on my cup and always wish me a happy day. I felt like a celebrity!"

Nitza made rapid progress and was getting around faster than anyone expected, but her story doesn't



Nitza's cafe coffee, warmed with a heart

end here. It gets even better. Determined to regain as full a recovery as possible, she reached out to her doctors for further advice and they suggested that she get physical therapy and begin a fitness program that could help her increase her strength and mobility. For Nitza, there was just one place to go and she marched herself straight to the JCC, knowing its fitness team could work wonders for her.

"I'd been using the JCC's health and wellness facilities for decades and the training and encouragement I received was always like food for me. I could never get enough," says Nitza.

“After my back surgery, I did extensive physical therapy and all the alternate treatment modalities my doctors recommended, but it wasn't until I started my new fitness routine at the J that I got the guidance and personal attention I really needed. If it wasn't for their incredible team of wellness experts, I'm not sure I'd be feeling the renewed sense of self I've been able to attain.”



Nitza came to the JCC every day to be coached by its certified health and wellness staff. She took cardio classes and worked closely with the JCC's Assistant Fitness Director Sherin Thankachan, who has a doctorate in physical therapy and specializes in rehab and injury prevention. Utilizing her extensive expertise in physiology, Sherin gave Nitza a comprehensive assessment and then developed a special exercise program for her that included strength and mobility training, as well as a strong focus on balance. With hard work and the special attention she received, Nitza recovered the quality of life she was after.

"Nitza was focused and determined, but after something as serious as back surgery, she was understandably a bit tentative at first," says Sherin. "But she was surrounded by a really supportive team and after just a few initial sessions, she realized she was capable of more than she thought."

"She had real drive and people who were rooting for her every step of the way, and it didn't take long for her to gain the confidence to believe that the surgery would not prevent her from reaching her goals. She pushed herself and practiced everything we did together at home, and her progress was remarkable. It's an inspiration for me to work with clients like Nitza and to be part of a wellness team that really works in unison to help people surmount some pretty challenging hurdles."

Today, Nitza is doing remarkably well and frequents the JCC as much as ever. "I really owe so much of my recovery to the expertise of the health and wellness team," Nitza concludes. "I don't know how I would have fared without them."

“ I must also credit the energy of the JCC as a whole - from the teachers who still ask after me to the guys in the coffee shop, who still draw hearts on my coffee cup every time I come to the café. The JCC is a place that embraces everyone with open arms. It has always been there for me and my family and the place we will always turn to for everything.”

Whatever needs, goals, or New Year's resolutions are on your list for the coming year, the JCC is here for you. If you've had an injury or are recovering from surgery like Nitza, we have experts who can work with you and your doctors to devise a fitness plan that will help you reach your very best potential. Or if you are just looking to kick-start your year with a healthy new lifestyle, we are your go-to place for everything health and wellness - from personal training with certified professionals to specialty wellness workshops, free fitness evaluations and nutrition consultations tailored to your individual needs. Visit us online or call our Health and Wellness Department at 201.569.7900, ext 412.