

# READING EAGLE

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## Berks Gyms battling restrictions, negative perception in age of COVID

By Andrew Kulp [akulp@readingeagle.com](mailto:akulp@readingeagle.com) [@KulpSays](https://twitter.com/KulpSays) on Twitter Jan 18, 2021



*Warren Zukina III, left, and Danielle Vallely launched Healthy U Fitness in Wyomissing in 2019 as a place to focus on one-on-one training for clients.*

Along with restaurants and other leisure businesses, local fitness centers were among the hardest hit by shutdowns and other COVID guidelines. The International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) estimated one in four gyms were in danger of closing permanently in 2020.

Plenty of fitness centers around Berks County are putting up a fight though — unsurprising considering perseverance is part of the business model. Even as some members continue to avoid indoor gathering places or turn to at-home fitness options, some gyms say they are undeterred.

"We pivoted and adjusted," said Warren Zukina III, co-owner of Healthy U Fitness in Wyomissing, as if he were describing a basic exercise routine.

"We came up with a whole plan. We installed new cleaning stations — our employees were always cleaning equipment, but now more than ever. We hired two more people just to help keep up with cleaning. And our trainers wear masks all the time during sessions. Everything's been laid out."

Lynn Kreider has owned LJ's Fitness in Womelsdorf for over 30 years and admits she's been disappointed by some of the discourse surrounding gyms as being dirty or unsafe

LJ's built its reputation in part by being a clean operation, said Kreider, and it continues to seek ways to take care the best possible care of its clients. That included instituting a mask mandate even for guests who are working out — a move that cost the gym members, and not necessarily the ones who have respiratory conditions.

"We're also at limited capacity and have at least nine feet of social distance between people in classes," said Kreider.

"The fitness industry has not had the greatest advocacy. We've been deemed dirty, unclean, unsafe and people have been reluctant to come back, so we've been trying to reach out to our members to assure our concern for health and well-being."

Growing pains and meeting challenges

Both Healthy U and LJ's were among the hundreds of local businesses to recently receive CARES Act funding through Rebuild Berks in the form of the New Start Grant Program. Both fitness centers were awarded \$25,000.

For Healthy U, which was opened by Zukina and Danielle Vallely in 2019, the financial aid from that program and PPP helped keep things moving. Their Penn Avenue studio, which focuses on one-on-one training, saw its membership rolls go from 143 down to almost 60 when the coronavirus hit.

The number is back up above 100 members, but that grant money may have prevented the start-up from becoming a statistic.

"The biggest thing the grant was used toward is paying our employees," said Zukina. "We're fighting the battle just like everybody else."

For a more established gym with a bit more spare capital like LJ's, the grant was actually able to be put to use in a way that not only could help grow business, but actively combat against the coronavirus threat.

Kreider started looking into UV-C disinfection lighting during the initial shutdown. As soon as LJ's suddenly had a little extra money in the bank, she invested in buying and installing lights in some of the most well-traveled areas of the gym.

"UVC lighting is used in hospital environments," said Kreider. "It can kill viruses, mold and other things in the air."

Still, between shutdowns and member cancellations, 2020 was not an easy year for LJ's — especially after it having completed a classroom addition in January, only two months before the coronavirus began wreaking havoc in everybody's lives.

"Our income hadn't been so low since 2012," said Kreider. "Our business was growing and we had the reins pulled back a little. That was tough."

Not losing sleep over the competition

Today, the coronavirus continues to create concerns for fitness centers, not all of which are so readily apparent.

The shuttering of gyms combined with fewer people visiting, whether out of fear or irritation with restrictions, has given a foothold to at-home fitness options. You've probably seen advertisements for Peloton and Mirror, which double as equipment and social tools that attempt to simulate a classroom environment.

Yet, operators don't sound overly concerned, even as an IHSA survey claims over 70% of gym members say they plan to "exercise different" in 2021.

"I've been doing this 30 years," said Kreider, "and before I was doing this, Jane Fonda was releasing video tapes. That didn't hurt the industry."

"The business of brick and mortar gyms has done nothing but explode, so I really do believe these people stuck at home, when the cloud lifts — and I think it will — we'll be busier than ever."

Zukina agreed. He and Valley created Healthy U in part because they found the impersonal nature at some chain gyms was a turnoff, and in fact a large percentage of people were paying for memberships they weren't actively using. The same might wind up proving true of some of this expensive, fancy equipment.

"When it comes to Peloton, Mirror, I'm not worried too much about them," said Zukina. "Some of our clients have them, but a lot don't even use it anymore."

"We focus more on our quality rather than quantity."

Gyms are doing whatever it takes

It makes sense fitness clubs aren't sweating about alternatives too much, as most demonstrated the ability to adapt to harsh and seemingly ever-changing conditions that fueled this uncertain environment.

Healthy U Fitness essentially cut its two-story gym in half, reducing the total number of training sessions happening at any given time from eight to four. Because so much of their time is spent interacting with clients as well, membership is really driven either by returning members or referrals — with a whopping 72% there based on recommendations.

LJ's Fitness, meanwhile, moved some of its classes on to social media after having previously used the online platform primarily for scheduling and advertising.

"We had the ability to be able to pivot from March 16 to get involved in the virtual realm," said Kreider. "Our group fitness classes went virtual right away, live streaming, and we have a pretty active social media page so it was really great."

Kreider learned something else from the coronavirus ordeal as well — that small, local fitness centers need to join together to make sure their voices are heard.

"We had no seat at the table," said Kreider of the conversation on COVID protocols and restrictions. "We got involved with PA Fitness Alliance, which is inviting fitness clubs of all sizes to participate so we can band together as an industry and not be painted in a corner as not clean, not safe."

"Frankly, fitness is essential to keep people healthy, too."

Berks County Coronavirus Covid-19 Fitness Centers Wyomissing Womelsdorf Gyms Business Cares Act

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