
There's no question that staying active and learning new skills helps to slow down the aging process and improve quality of life. **Meet six inspiring people** who are not slowing down as they approach their golden years. They have each embraced new and exciting activities that prove

it's never too late



STORY: **DEBBIE INGRAM**

PHOTOGRAPHY: **DJAMEL E. RAMOUL + MAXIME RAMOUL**



Mary Jane Hunt

pilot

Mary Jane Hunt first flew with her father, a Navy pilot, when she was just 10 days old. They talked about her learning to fly when she turned 18, but, sadly, he passed away before that day came. As an adult, she became busy raising thoroughbred horses and show dogs. Aviation faded from her mind. Decades later, at the age of 51, she was given flying lessons as a gift.

"Young people today learn so quickly because they grow up playing simulation video games," Mary Jane says, "It took me a while to get the hang of it. I had not flown in a small

plane since I was a child. The first time I solo'd it was so exciting."

The 53-year-old earned her private pilot's license, her seaplane rating, and, recently obtained her instrument rating. She has logged over 400 flying hours in the pilot's seat.

She almost gave up a couple of times.

"Some parts were very hard, and sometimes I didn't think I'd stick to it," she explains, "My instructors really helped raise my confidence." The death of one instructor, a close friend, was another time she almost quit, but persevered. Mary Jane now plans to get rated for multi-engine planes.

"I learned that I am incredibly capable of learning new things."

In fact, in 2008 she decided to go back to college and plans to get a degree in art history.

"The confidence I gained learning to fly helped me decide I could go back to school," says Mary Jane.

Always an active person, Mary Jane says she doesn't know what retirement means.

"Life evolves," she says, "I'm doing less in the horse business and more in areas I had set aside. Life is not a dress rehearsal!"

They take a group lesson and a private lesson every week with instructor John Whipple and insist you only need to learn a few steps to feel confident on the dance floor.

"Anywhere we go there's a place to go dancing, so it gives us something we can do wherever we travel."

While they don't have plans to compete in the near future, they enjoy watching ballroom dance competitions and participating in the open dances and dance workshops.

Age isn't an issue when it comes to dancing. Diana says ballroom dance is the type of hobby you can start at any age. Their favorite is called the Nightclub, a slow dance similar to the Waltz, as well as the West Coast Swing and the Salsa.

"You have to really work together learning ballroom," says Diana. "There could be some arguments," she jokes, "but overall it brings you closer."



Diana+David Lammermeir

ballroom dancers

The Lammermeirs, married for 32 years, always stayed very busy raising a family and working in the medical field. Diana, 55, is a registered nurse, and David, 56, is a cardiothoracic surgeon. With their son getting married last June, they had incentive to take some dancing lessons with friends. As soon as they hit the floor, they were hooked.

"Dancing was like nothing we'd ever done," says David, "It takes a lot of focus, and so it helps to get your mind off of work and other issues."

Having something new to focus on helped renew their energy for their professional lives. David explains, "You have a better attitude towards work when you have something else to look forward to at the end of the day."

Nervous at first, they worried the other dancers in their class would be more advanced, and that ballroom would be "stuffy." David says that wasn't the case.

"Ballroom dancing is fun and the people in our class were newcomers also, so we were all in the same boat," says David.

Cori Forte Zivojnovich

dressage horseback rider

While she has learned a lot from her instructors, Cori says she also learned from her horse, "I'm a Type A person, very wound up, but the horse teaches you that you have to relax. You have to let go of your fears and trust your animal." Cori enjoys the physical challenges of riding. "It's hard, physical work," she says, "Knowing I can do it has helped me feel more confident and independent."

At 57, Cori is satisfied with learning to walk, trot, and canter in balance with her horse, but she may consider competing one day. Finding time to train is one obstacle, as she balances full time work as a hair stylist with commitments to family and church. But she won't give it up. Cori's advice to others is simple:

"Don't let anybody tell you can't do something. Learning something new at any age is stimulating and invigorating."

When Cori Forte Zivojnovich was given a horse for her 50th birthday, she was terrified of the animal.

"I had always had a passion for horses," she explains, "but I grew up in a household with no pets, and had no experience around animals."

Determined to fulfill her passion, Cori began training in the art of dressage, where riders guide their horses through a variety of intricate movements.

"It was very challenging, as I was learning to ride and training the horse

at the same time," Cori says.

Also intimidating was the setting in which she was training.

"The Longwood Equestrian Center is a top-notch training facility for world-class riders, and here I was learning to walk and trot," adds Cori.

Still, she kept at it, enjoying the relationship she developed with her horse. "Doing something you have always wanted to do, and finding harmony with this large animal, is so rewarding. It is a joy and a blessing."



Hope Meffert

weight lifter

Every morning, six days a week, you'll find 69-year-old Hope Meffert and her workout partners, Sheila Arnold, 57, and John Buffington, 70, lifting weights at the YMCA. They have worked with trainer Joe Marotta for the last five years, and have become close friends in the process.

"I didn't know Sheila until Joe asked if we'd like to work out together, then we brought John into the group," says Hope, "We have become great friends working out at the Y."

The camaraderie with her workout partners is one of the biggest rewards she has gained from her exercise routine. Another reward is good health.

"I've been able to keep my cholesterol down and stay off medication," Hope says, "And I just move better than most people my age."

While her workouts are intense, she attributes her lack of injury to having a qualified trainer.

Francis Robacker

scuba diver

Francis Robacker had never even thought about becoming certified to scuba dive until after he retired, and started visiting St. Croix every year with friends. He and a friend took a resort dive class one year, which is a short dive course designed to introduce people to diving. They had so much fun they decided to become certified divers by the time they returned to St. Croix the following year.

Back in Ocala, Francis signed up for classes with Craig Clark at the Aquatic Dive Center, and, at the age of 61, he became a certified diver. Now 67, Francis has been on dive trips all over the Caribbean, Mexico, the Netherlands, Honduras, Belize, and even the Galapagos Islands.

"The most rewarding dive was in the Galapagos Islands on the Equator," says Francis, "We did this one on a 100 foot live-aboard yacht. Here we experienced the untouched underwater world and encountered a 50 foot whale shark. What a fantastic sight."

In fact, Hope is in such good shape, she recently took first place in her first weight lifting competition with an 85-pound bench press lift.

"I was a little nervous going into that first competition," she recalls, "but everyone in the weight lifting world was so supportive and applauded each others' efforts."

While many people would find that frightening, Francis says he really didn't have any fears learning to dive. "I knew that if I did what I was supposed to do as a diver, all that I had been taught, that I would be alright," he says.

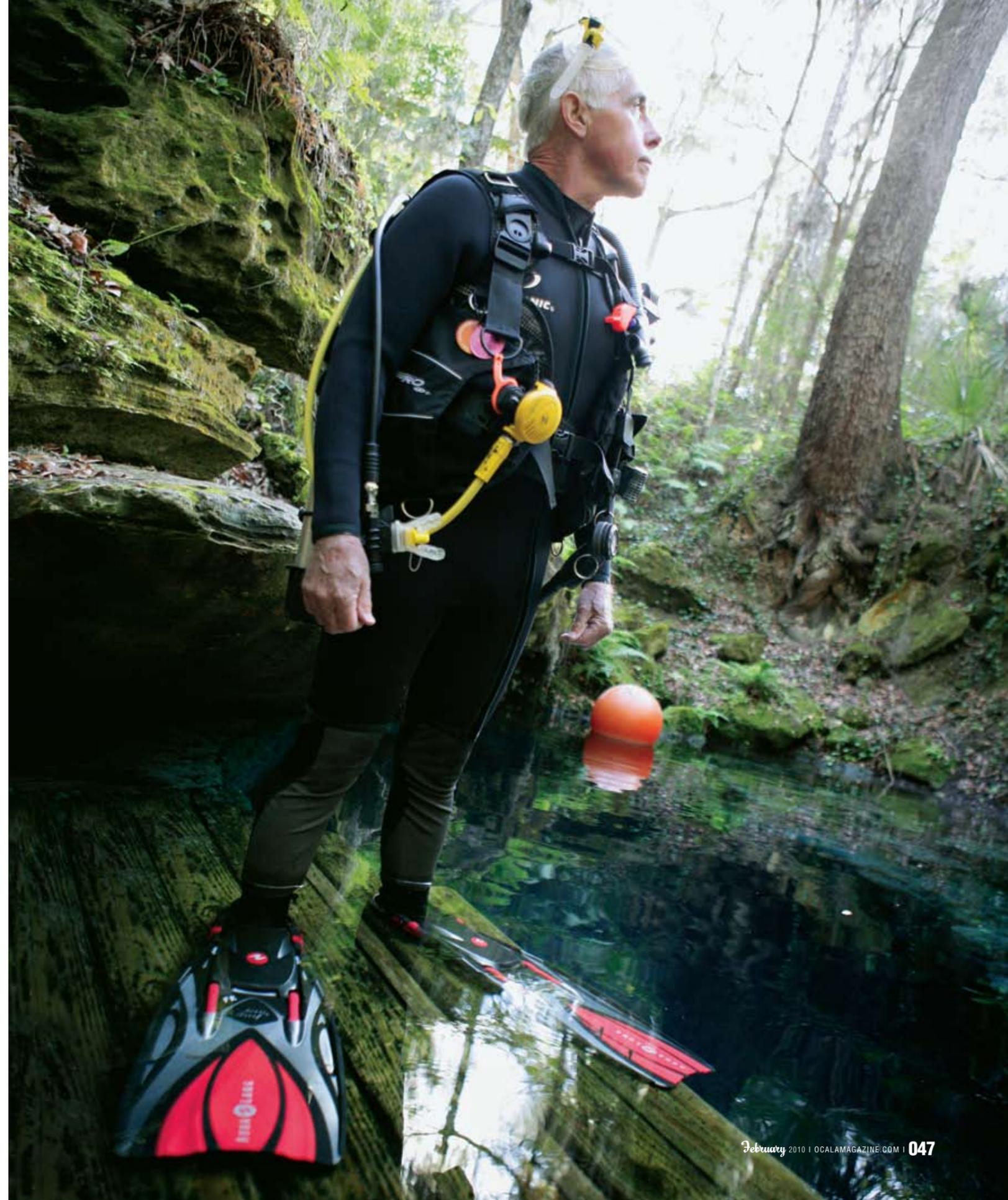
In the process, Francis developed a lot of confidence in his abilities, and he learned that to fully enjoy his sport, he'd have to stay in good physical condition. "I realized that diving was good for me because it showed me that I must always be in good physical and mental condition to continue."

He plans to get his Master Diver certification, and while the swimming portion of the certification is challenging, seeing the underwater world makes it worth the challenges.

According to Francis, "God intended us to enjoy His creation. How often we put things off until tomorrow. The more we do now, the better quality of life we will have. Staying active as a senior citizen is not easy, but the alternative lifestyle is deadly."

She plans to keep training to lift heavier weights and continue competing as long as she can.

"Exercising gives me stamina; I feel so much younger than I am," says Hope, who still works as a real estate agent. "It's fun and so rewarding, but once you set your mind to it, it's not difficult."





Julie Barnes

triathlete

As a physician's assistant, Julie Barnes has always preached to her patients to lead a healthy lifestyle, so when she realized her own lifestyle needed a change, she jumped into action.

"I had gained some weight over a few years, and I wasn't happy with myself," she says. "I needed a lifestyle change."

Julie began working out with fitness trainer Buddy Karolev and lost 50 pounds in seven months.

"I wanted to be an inspiration to the patients I work with," Julie says, "to show them you can accomplish anything."

When she heard about the Christian training group, tri-HIM.org, she decided to do her first triathlon, a race consisting of a half-mile swim, 12-mile bike ride, and

3-mile run. Training hasn't been easy, and there have been times she wasn't sure she could continue.

"The first time I did a practice swim in Lake Weir, I panicked, but when the race came, I was prepared."

With her husband's support she's made training routine. "My husband is so supportive," Julie says, "I go straight to the YMCA after work to train, sometime for two or three hours." He often has dinner ready for her when she gets home.

Julie completed her first triathlon last May, in just over two hours. Her goal for the next race is to break the two-hour mark. Her biggest goal, however, is just to stay with the lifestyle changes she has made.

"You have to look at it as a whole lifestyle, not a temporary event, like a diet."

During her weight loss, Julie's weight hit a plateau at times, but she didn't give up.

"It's frustrating, but I've always been able to overcome it."

Ellen Tarrant

tennis player

Ellen was getting bored going to the gym when a friend suggested they start taking tennis lessons together at Fort King Tennis Center. Teaching Pro Leigh Chak encouraged Ellen to join a competitive league. The 51-year-old real estate agent worried she wouldn't fit in with the younger women playing.

"My only fear was that the younger girls would be cliquish and I would embarrass myself," says Ellen.

However, she learned that she could keep up with them.

"I do wish I had started sooner; it is harder starting later. But I learned that I

can do it, it just takes practice. There have been obstacles along the way. It can be dangerous! I rolled my ankle once; it's hard on the body."

Ellen says she also learned a lot about herself.

"I learned that I'm just as good as anyone else, and not to get down on myself. Tennis is such a mental game. It's important to stay positive and to uplift and encourage your partner during a match."

The thrill of competition was something Ellen hadn't expected she would enjoy as much as she does.

"My goal is for my team to make it to the regional playoffs, and to increase my USTA rating," she says.

But the most important thing, she says, is to have fun and enjoy the learning process.

Ellen advises others to start living, no matter how old you are.

"Age is in your mind," she says, "I still feel like I'm in my 30's in my mind. The biggest reward is the friendships I have made," says Ellen, "I love my tennis sisters, young and old. On the court, age doesn't matter. We're all equal."

Adam Alper had been interested in martial arts his whole life, but never had the time or opportunity to train. By the time the 48-year-old family practice doctor had the opportunity, he wasn't sure he'd be able to do it physically. But with the support of Barbara Bruno, at Bruno's Martial Arts Academy, he has obtained his black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and in the weapons bo-staff and numchucks.

"I needed exercise, and I needed to practice what I preach," explains Adam, "I could spend the rest of my life running on a treadmill, or fulfill a dream and learn a new skill."

So far, a broken little toe has been the only price he's had to pay. Tae Kwon Do also provides him with an outlet for stress. "Focusing on something other than work helps to clear your brain," he says.

"Now is the time to do what you want," Adam advises, "time moves fast and we tend to forget our dreams." Adam believes if you have a dream, you should chase it, "it doesn't matter where you are in life, if you want something there is no reason why you can't achieve it."

Adam's dream is to master the weapons art of Korean swords. He has earned his blue belt thus far.

Adam Alper

Tae Kwon Do black belt

"It is by far the hardest physical activity I've ever done, and also the most fun," he says. He doesn't plan to compete; for him, it's more personal.

"Becoming better trained and accomplishing the skills to earn my black belt are the biggest rewards."

Also rewarding are the friendships Adam has made at his dojo; he enjoys bringing others into the dojo and introducing them to his passion.

"I've made some really great friendships I would not have if not for Tae Kwon Do," he says.

