

Tarheel Footprints in Health Care

Recognizing unusual and often unsung contributions of individual citizens who have made health care for North Carolinians more accessible and of higher quality

Recognizing Jean Zoda, BSN, RN



The quote from writer and humorist Leo Rosten, "I cannot believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. I think the purpose of life is to be useful..." could have been attributed to Jean Zoda, registered nurse and arthritis program instructor and advocate. But to those who know her work with the Arthritis Foundation and her advocacy on behalf of people with arthritis, Jean would probably modify the quote to say, "I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy AND to be useful." Jean has found a unique way to blend being useful to others while harvesting joy and good health for herself.

A few years ago Jean found herself 100 pounds overweight, in poor health, and unable to do more than the activities of daily living. Exercise discouraged her because it made her joints sore. Enter the Arthritis Foundation Aquatic Program. Jean decided to give water exercise a try. The water exercise classes helped Jean lose weight, recover her health, and renew her spirit. The instructor was supportive and encouraging and even suggested that Jean train to become a water fitness instructor herself. This ended up giving Jean a new life journey and a new career path.

Because of her own personal journey, her newfound commitment to exercise, and as a testament to the benefits of water exercise, Jean forged ahead with becoming an Arthritis Foundation Aquatic Program instructor. Jean's philosophy from her days of nursing, "seeing the whole person," flows into the classes she teaches. She believes it's important to support the whole person by not only providing the benefits of being in the water and exercising, but by connecting people to support groups, providing resources, and, most of all, having fun. According to Jean, "Water fitness...has to be all about FUN to keep people motivated and coming back."

Jean continues her life journey as she works to become the best instructor she can be. Jean is now a Master Trainer for the Arthritis Foundation Aquatic Program and conducts instructor courses around the state. She has become an instructor for the Arthritis Foundation Exercise Program and is always looking for opportunities to be useful to others. Jean has become an advocate for evidence-based programs for people with arthritis. She wants people to have access to exercise and self-help programs proven to be beneficial for arthritis sufferers so they do not get discouraged by ineffective programs.

Jean continues her usefulness by serving on the NC Arthritis Program Advisory Board and helping to craft the State Arthritis Plan which directs arthritis resources and services for North Carolinians through 2010. Jean also contributed as an aquatic exercise expert and advocate for the UNC TV program HealthWise: Arthritis in July 2006, and her community outreach includes promoting the Triangle Arthritis Walk for 2007. As an Arthritis Foundation volunteer, Jean promotes arthritis programs with a local continuing care retirement community and is a frequent guest speaker at Triangle-area arthritis support groups, school programs, and health fairs. Jean is particularly proud of a tremendously successful Disability Day at an area elementary school where she taught elementary-age children about arthritis and the importance of taking care of their bodies. Jean has also committed to continuing her professional growth as an arthritis advocate by attending arthritis-related conferences and seminars.

Word is getting out about Jean's advocacy and aquatic classes. Many community agencies have contacted her to come and speak. Her expertise in aquatic fitness has now broadened to include being a multiple sclerosis aquatic instructor and American Red Cross lifeguard, lifeguard instructor, and water safety instructor. She is also a member of the Aquatic Exercise Association and is a certified Aquatic Fitness Professional. In addition, she teaches weekly Arthritis Foundation Aquatic exercise classes and works part-time for the NC Arthritis Program providing technical and data support and follow-up with newly trained instructors.

Not everyone has the privilege of combining their passion and their work. Jean is one of the lucky ones. Jean will tell you, "The greatest blessing and reaffirmation of my work comes when a new participant joins my class. For example, one student recently started my arthritis aquatics class saying she couldn't do much. She had tried unsuccessfully with other types of physical activity, suffered with arthritis and fibromyalgia, and had extra weight and other health factors that barely allowed her accomplish the activities of daily living. She heard about the arthritis class at the pool and knew she needed to do something and wondered if this class would help. I just smiled at her, knowing first-hand about her journey and told her that she had come to the right place. And I began my work."

The *North Carolina Medical Journal* is proud to recognize volunteer, advocate, and professional Jean Zoda for her passion, caring, and commitment to citizens in North Carolina living and being physically active with arthritis.