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# Getting well: Four Harford residents share their journeys to better health



Wellness director Nicole Bodley-Smith spots Dave Yensan during his workout at The Arena Club in Bel Air. Yensan changed his lifestyle and dropped 45 pounds in less than a year. (Brian Krista / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By **Kathi Santora**  
For Harford Magazine

FEBRUARY 26, 2016, 5:23 PM

**W**ith every new year, birthday or overdue doctor's appointment, many of us pledge to take better care of ourselves. Where to begin?

"The first step is taking a step," says Sharon Lipford, executive director of Healthy Harford, a nonprofit based at Upper Chesapeake Health that connects residents to wellness education, health care providers, mental health services and more.

These four Harford residents sized up their health challenges, took that first step and the next, eventually

seizing control of their physical and mental health.

## **Money well spent**

Except for calling on his Aflac insurance customers at Bel Air's Arena Club, Dave Yensan never darkened the door of a health club.

"Gym was a class you had in high school," he says. "Other than that, why would you do that to yourself?"

In April 2015, though, his cardiologist lectured him about his weight and sedentary lifestyle. During his next business visit to the Arena Club, something moved him to talk with a membership representative. During the orientation tour, he couldn't walk through the building without sitting down and taking a break.

At 5 feet 8 and age 73, Yensan weighed 240 pounds, a long way from the 183 pounds he was required to maintain as an Army helicopter pilot more than 35 years ago.

Ten months later, he weighs in at 195 pounds and cruises through the conditioning circuit on a 12-minute-mile pace.

Once he made the decision to get fit, he tackled his goals with a vengeance. Yensan rescheduled his part-time work hours and reserved five mornings a week for conditioning and strength training. He took aquatic fitness classes in the saltwater therapy pool. With dietary coaching, he changed his eating habits in favor of five small, protein-packed healthy meals a day.

"Somebody said, 'Well, what is this costing you a month?' " he recalls. "I said I didn't care. What was I spending on alcohol and eating out on a very regular basis? Who knows?"

He advises nonathletes to purchase sessions with a personal trainer or take supervised classes in the beginning: "When it came time to do something [about my health], I had no idea where to start. I have no doubt that I would have hurt myself," he says. "Give up a few meals eating out at a restaurant and spend some money in a gym and on a trainer. Learn to care about yourself."

## **Choosing the challenge**

Don't expect Eva De Roma to sugarcoat the effort it took to quit smoking, abstain from drinking, lose 65 pounds and reject surgery in favor of intense physical therapy when diagnosed with degenerative disk disease in her neck.

“It’s work,” she says. “Going to the gym is work. Physical therapy is work. Everybody just wants to pop a pill.”

For De Roma, 62, the key to overcoming her successive health issues has always been to seek out the right combination of treatment and supportive people.

Nicotine Anonymous in 2002 helped her overcome a two-pack-a-day habit. Happy to be rid of the smoking dependency, she didn’t worry about weight gain until hitting the 240-pound mark. It was time for action once again.

By the time she walked into the Arena Club in 2005, De Roma was self-conscious: “I wore one of those big bathing suits that covers everything to swim class. After that, I wanted to go into the shower with my turtleneck on.”

She moved on to group weightlifting and strength training classes.

“In the beginning, I started out in the back and did the best I could,” she says. “I was really determined to take my life and my health in my hands, and I did.”

She is now stable at 175 pounds, focusing each day on eating prudently and avoiding white sugar and flour.

Recently, yet another challenge arose. A physician advised surgery to ease neck pain and arm tingling, but the potential for voice loss as a side effect terrified De Roma, who is family service director at Harford Memorial Gardens. Instead, she opted for regular sessions of aquatic and manual tissue therapy at Agape Physical Therapy that reduced her symptoms.

“I surrounded myself with all the help that I could get, because there is help out there,” De Roma says. “Some women are desperate. They don’t know where to go and who to ask.”

That’s why she’s happy to share her story.

“If I can reach one woman who is desperate, that would be awesome,” she says.

### **Actions speak louder**

Phil Anderson set out for his first long-distance run in 1980, a day after he got caught in a traffic jam near the finish line of the **Baltimore Marathon**. As he watched runners stagger toward the end, turned to his wife and said, “I can run 26.2 miles.”

Actually, he now chuckles, he could barely run a block in his first outing.

However, something about running clicked with him. Since that unpromising start, Anderson has clocked more than 43,000 miles, mostly on streets and in parks around Bel Air.

After every run, he recorded distances, weather conditions and other particulars in his extensive collection of running log books. To keep up this pace, he rarely strayed from a near-perfect body fat percentage.

He was, therefore, that much more shocked when he had a stroke in April 2007.

The stroke damaged the left side of Anderson's brain, resulting in Broca's aphasia, a condition that makes verbal and written communication difficult. Several days after his stroke, he was able to say only one phrase: "Thank you."

After years of intense speech therapy and daily at-home drills, he has regained function, though he will never return to his prior level of speaking.

But one thing didn't change — he could still run.

"I took that to mean that I could use running as a way to raise awareness about strokes," says Anderson.

Within the year after his stroke, Anderson organized his first MA & PA Heritage Trail-based Survivor Run event to raise awareness about stroke recovery. Twenty-five people, mostly friends, showed up. Since then, attendance has grown to nearly 300 runners.

"I've run 33 marathons and 77 ultramarathons," says Anderson. "I did that and still had a stroke. I am trying to make my friends who run with me and anyone else understand that it can happen to anyone."

## **Invisible battle**

Sarah Crimmins, now 37, was a college student when she experienced frightening episodes of racing thoughts, euphoria and depression. Doctors diagnosed her with bipolar disorder.

"Like any good person with something insurmountable in front of them, I decided to ignore it," she says.

Instead, she moved to Texas to take her first elementary school teaching job. It was there, far away from home and family, that she was first hospitalized. That marked the beginning of 10 years of additional hospitalizations, attempts to find the right balance of medication and an unsuccessful search for a purpose in

life.

Finally, she says now from her Bel Air home, she has reached a place of healing.

Crimmins credits finding the right doctor, her willingness to try various combinations of medication and her current volunteer work with the Harford County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

Nationally-based NAMI provides education, advocacy and direct support for individuals with mental illness and their families. Increasingly, NAMI has trained volunteers like Sarah who have experienced mental illness to facilitate support groups and educational programs for members.

Her teaching credentials are useful once again. Crimmins facilitates a 10-week, peer-to-peer course in which participants with mental illness learn about symptoms and illness management. She also runs a regular peer support group and takes part in “In Our Own Voice,” a NAMI-sponsored program in which people who have experienced mental illness share their stories in an effort to erase stigma and open dialogue about mental illness.

Crimmins hopes that her volunteer work will help people find healing and correct some of the misunderstandings about serious mental illness. The mostly invisible nature of mental illness, she says, is a real barrier.

“I can’t show you a picture of what mental illness is like. I look perfectly normal,” she says. “That used to frustrate me because I looked the same as everyone else, but at the same time, I was fighting for my life.”

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## **If you go**

### **9th Annual Survivor Run**

April 3, 8 a.m.

Starting line at MaGerk’s Pub & Grill,  
120 S. Bond St., Bel Air

\$25 registration

[survivorrund.com](http://survivorrund.com)

### **NAMI Connection**

7 p.m.-8:30 p.m., second and fourth Wednesdays of each month

William N. McFaul Activities Center

525 W. MacPhail Road, Bel Air

Anyone who has a mental illness

is welcome to attend.

410-884-8691

[namimd.org](http://namimd.org)

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