

# Mentors and Mantras

BY DAYNA STODDART



I am grateful for the mentors who have had an influential impact on the direction of my career path: Dr. Kenneth Cooper, M.D; Maureen Hagan, COO of Canfitpro and VP of Program Innovation and Fitness Development for both Canfitpro and GoodLife Fitness; Dr. Terry Ferebee Eckmann, PhD professor at Minot State University, North Dakota.

Kenneth Cooper is a medical doctor and former Air Force lieutenant colonel from Oklahoma. He is a world-renowned inspiring leader and an influencer. He merged medicine and fitness and has dedicated his life's work to the "Power of Prevention." During his 13 years of service in both the US Army and the Air Force, Dr. Cooper served as Flight Surgeon and as a director of the Aerospace Medical Laboratory. He developed the 12 minute and 1.5 mile fitness tests and the aerobics point system used today by branches of the military, schools and organizations worldwide.

In 1970, Dr. Cooper founded the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas to explore the relationship between cardiovascular fitness and health and longevity. He coined the word "aerobics" and submitted the official definition to the Oxford English Dictionary. The popularity of aerobics emerged in the fitness industry in the 1970s and continued to grow over the next 20 to 30 years. Jazzercise and aerobics were popularized by Jane Fonda and the 20 minute workouts on City TV.

Growing up as a gymnast, movement was important to me and it played a necessary role in my wellbeing. After many sprains, strains and injuries, I knew I wanted to help others, which led me down the path to physical therapy.

In 1991, I enrolled in the Human Kinetics Program at the University of Guelph, Ontario. Human gross anatomy, a course rarely offered outside of medical school, was part of our curriculum. This was a pivotal experience for me. Seeing firsthand, disease and disease processes from the inside and how organs and tissues were affected was profound for me. There was no denying the relationship between lifestyle choices and their impact on disease processes and health.

Fast forward two years...I was enrolled in the Physical Therapy Program at the University of Western Ontario in London. As a fitness instructor, I was teaching and influencing others to stay active and to be healthy. As I studied, we referenced multiple articles and research papers by Dr. Kenneth Cooper. I admired his work.

In 1989, Gin Miller and Reebok promoted step aerobics worldwide. It exploded in popularity in the 1990s at gyms and fitness studios. I became an avid instructor and participant

but I also observed many complaints of knee issues from step participants. My final year thesis on "injuries in step aerobics" involved identifying the types, locations and frequency of injuries and determining any factors relating to the cause and prevention of those injuries.

This was the era and onset of research and studies indicating the correlation between health and fitness and an active lifestyle. The number of participants in step aerobics was increasing as it was deemed to be a safe and effective high intensity, low impact workout.

Many aerobics participants had switched to taking only step classes. My regret is that I did not publish my thesis as requested by my professors. The fitness industry was also going through a transformation in the 1990s. There was an increasing demand for quality group fitness instructors, aka "aerobics instructors" at the same time that personal training was emerging.

I was introduced to Maureen Hagan, a physiotherapist and fitness industry leader in London, Ontario. Maureen helped me facilitate the distribution of surveys for my research project at multiple gyms throughout the city. I was so grateful for her guidance and mentorship. She invited me to attend and to participate in the "BodyLife Fitness" conference held in London, Ontario in September 1994.



Maureen Hagan

"BodyLife" was launched and its first event was in the fall of 1993 in London, Ontario. The goal was to develop educated fitness professionals, while raising the standard within the fitness industry to benefit everyone on a national level. In 1995, BodyLife was officially renamed CanFitPro and is Canada's largest fitness education organization. It is also one of the largest in the world along with its Fitness Expo and trade show.

After graduating from UWO with a BSc in Physical Therapy, I relocated to work as a physical therapist in Chicago. I witnessed the vicious cycle that inactivity had on my patients and the impact that unhealthy lifestyle choices made on their recovery, rehab and overall health and well-being.

Exercise and physical activity become more and more important with every passing year. I have used Dr. Cooper's quote for many years as it resonates so strongly with me: "We do not stop exercising because we grow old; we grow old because we stop exercising."

Exercise is Medicine was truly becoming my platform.

Pilates was growing in popularity and many physiotherapists gravitated to this training and certification as this form of exercise had a strong rehabilitative component. I certified as both a mat and a Reformer instructor.

In 2007 I joined the International Council on Active Aging (ICAA). I attend their conference every year which brings together health and fitness industry leaders.



Terry Eckmann



Terry and Dayna

Here I met Terry Eckmann, PhD. She has been an incredible mentor and friend to me over the past 12 years. Terry is a professor at Minot State University, North Dakota, an ICAA advisory board member, and a motivational speaker who presents internationally on topics related to exercise and the brain, older adult exercise and a variety of topics on health and wellness. She has also written numerous book chapters and articles on these topics.

Terry and I published an article on "The Power of Posture" in the July, 2015 issue of the Journal on Active Aging.

With Terry's encouragement, I have now presented twice at ICAA conferences, teaching colleagues "A Body Balance Class demonstrating The Power of Posture" and how to implement these foundations into an effective group exercise program.



I have created and choreographed three signature classes that I teach at the Recreation Centre.

They are all restorative and pilates-based mindful practices that incorporate posture and core work, balance, strengthening, stretching and progressive relaxation.

**Bfit** is a complimentary class offered on Tuesdays at 11:15 a.m. It is a 45 minute introductory gentle movement class of light cardio, strengthening, balance, corework, breathwork, stretching and relaxation. This is also a building block to Ballates and Body Balance classes.

**Ballates** is a paid program offered on Tuesdays at 8 a.m. It is a dynamic and functional fitness class using a variety of stability balls and weights.

**Body Balance** is a paid program offered on Thursdays at 8 a.m. It is a total mind and body experience that strengthens one's core, improves posture, bone density and muscle strength, using stability balls, weights and a foam roller.

Now, almost 30 years later, both my purpose and passion remain:

To promote health and longevity through physical activity and mindful movement.

To encourage, enlighten, inspire and motivate people to increase or start some form of physical activity to make a direct significant impact on their health.

To teach and guide those as they get started and to motivate them to continue on their fitness journey.

This past year at the ICAA conference, I had the privilege to listen to the keynote speech given by Dr. Kenneth Cooper and to personally meet him. Thirty years of inspiration and influencing my career path, what an honour!



Dr. Kenneth Cooper and Dayna

Just as the journey of my career has and will continue to evolve, this quote from Dr. Cooper says it all: "Fitness is a journey, not a destination; you must continue for the rest of your life."