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PEOPLE

Mall-walker confidential

Hours before they officially open, many of Toronto's shopping malls are already teeming with people. However, these senior-citizen strollers aren't up early to shop, but to get some exercise and socialize. We partake in a morning ritual that few Torontonians under the age of 65 even know about.

BY: KIM HUGHES

As secret societies go, it's not the sexiest. There are no coded handshakes, the rituals don't involve hallucinogens, and the members are more apt to carp about bunion pain than howl at the moon.

But when it comes to heavily attended and highly organized events that pretty much no one under the age of 65 knows anything about, it's hard to top the GTA's ad hoc society of mall walkers.

In the wee hours before their H&Ms, Starbucks, and Indigos open for business, shopping malls citywide host (or at least permit) "mall walking" programs designed to get neighbourhood senior citizens active in safe, controlled environments where treacherous ice never accumulates and summer's oppressive heat is clobbered by failsafe A/C.

Many malls cultivate these clubs, seeing morning walkers for what they are—off-peak customers shopping daily who spread excellent word of mouth. Plus, the optics are unbeatable: ostensibly crass commercial enterprises are recast as caring community hubs catering to society's most overlooked members.

That explains why, on a crisp December morning at 8 a.m.—as the hipsters downtown slowly shiver to life—amiable 80-something Ida Goldman (pictured below) gamely pushes her walker through the dormant aisles of Centerpoint Mall in the city's north end, gazing through darkened shop windows and chatting with her cohorts in the Walk Our Way Walking Club.



Twice a week from October to June, Walk Our Way members like Goldman congregate at the small unfussy plaza at Yonge and Steeles long before opening hours. After signing in and hanging up their coats, the 40-odd regulars do gentle laps around the mall, alone or in pairs, before decompressing with a chinwag.

Some grab staples at No Frills before heading home as the shops open at 10 a.m. Others linger over coffee at the Pickle Barrel. Three times a year, breakfast is served to those who've ponied up a \$10 membership fee, which also buys a t-shirt. Though Tuesdays and Thursday are designated walking days, keeners come five days a week.

Indeed, for many seniors, mall walking means the difference between getting out and being marooned at home. Many also cite the health benefits. But the social aspect is paramount: Lasting friendships have blossomed on those languid early morning strolls between Laura Secord and Shoppers Drug Mart.

The only thing truly surprising about mall walking—which happens in every corner of the GTA, from Cloverdale Mall to Woodbine Centre to the Atrium on Bay, mainly free of charge—is that more businesses targeting seniors haven't stepped up as sponsors. Also, that something so popular to a noteworthy segment of our society—albeit one mainly void of smart phones with their tell-tale tweets and Facebook updates—flies completely beneath the radar.

“By the time I arrive around 8 a.m. there are 100 people, mostly seniors, not only walking the mall but sitting in the food court having a coffee,” offers Lisa Peatt, general manager at Eglinton Square (at Victoria Park), which itself turns 60 next year and draws its walkers from the surrounding area that Peatt describes as heavily populated with older folks.

Unlike Centerpoint Mall, Eglinton Square doesn't have an official mall-walking program in place. But it nevertheless hosts an annual Christmas breakfast—with a Salvation Army band playing seasonal favourites, no less—to show appreciation for those seniors who daily turn up and “act like little mall sheriffs.”

“Because they are here at the crack of dawn, they find things, small fixes and housekeeping things that we haven't found yet, and they'll let us know,” Peatt chuckles. “They take good care of the mall and they take ownership of the mall.”

“When I first started walking, I wondered if we were all supposed to march around together. But it's very informal,” says Kit Seelenmayer, who began traversing Centerpoint following a heart attack in 1999.

Fourteen years later, she still walks and volunteers each Thursday, smartly tackling the mall's third-

of-a-mile circumference before joining pals like Phyllis Rattle—a Walking Club veteran “since day one”—for Timbits, today courtesy of Chartwell, which sponsors the walks as a means of promoting its retirement residences.

Chartwell—which underwrites the above-mentioned thrice-annual membership breakfasts that “encourage people to come out and mingle more,” according to Centerpoint’s marketing director, Eleni Koukoulidis—had planned to offer free blood-pressure readings the day of our visit.

Alas, a nurse proved unavailable, so the clinic was scuppered. But the Timbits and logo-embossed lanyards were enthusiastically scooped up. Really, do the people hocking walk-in bathtubs know about these programs?

Seelenmayer continues: “People often come for the fitness, but end up forming friendships. You just start walking and, the next thing you know, you’re talking to someone and then that becomes the person you’re walking with each day.”

Anyone who doubts the positive impact of mall walking should engage the fabulously named Nepton James West-Spencer, who has walked laps at Eglinton Square almost daily for over a decade. Ask him his age, and the amiable Jamaica native (pictured below with Peatt) roars.



“Ha! If I take off my shirt and tell you how old I am you’ll say, ‘No way!’ Let’s put it this way: I am between 65 and 70. You have to see me to believe me! I am a physical guy and I have been physical all my life.

“But there is also a social aspect” to the mall walking, West-Spencer confirms. “Quite a few people know each other by name, so it’s ‘Good morning, Mary’ and ‘Good morning, John.’

“And you’ll find that, after people walk, they form into their own groups. They’ll go to Tim Hortons or McDonald’s to have a coffee or breakfast and chat. It’s a really good crowd.”

And a quirky crowd, if you ask Walter Fisher, the jewelry-clad dandy (pictured below) who handles the Walk Our Way Walking Club’s Tuesday-morning shift at Centerpoint. He (somewhat crankily) shakes his head at the elderly gent with a cane who prefers to scrawl his handle on a separate sheet of paper, not the sign-in sheet with the members’ names already typed up.



But Fisher—who travels cross-town from the Flemington Park area to be here—has a soft spot for Ms. Goldman; he draws an arrow beside her name so she can more easily spot where she has to sign in. “Her vision’s not so good,” he says, adding that, in addition to the friendship, “I come here for the shopping,” he laughs.

The Walk Our Way Walking Club, which celebrates 20 years in 2014 and is volunteer-run, has seen its numbers steadily diminish. “A lot of the hardcore people that started this have moved away or died or can’t walk anymore,” Seelenmayer says.

But the camaraderie—among the walkers, and between the walkers and the malls and its staffers—remains palpable.

“Over the years, the names and faces have become so familiar; they are like the Centerpoint Mall family,” says Koukoulidis, who notes that her mall’s relatively small size makes it easy for more fragile walkers to navigate. “We are always hearing about what people are up to. If someone takes ill, we send them a get well card.”

“I had one lady say to me once that if she didn’t have this mall—this walk—to get up and get dressed for, she wouldn’t leave the house,” says Eglinton Square’s Peatt. “That was very touching. It showed how much this mall means to them and to the community within the mall.

“People congregate and build friendships. It really is something we should be celebrating.”

TAGS *Centerpoint Mall, Cloverdale Mall, Eglinton Square, Elderly, Fitness, healthcare*

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Michael

Great story. It's nice to hear about these little communities, which I barely knew existed (aside from vague memories of walking around Promenade with my Grandma).

I'd imagine if some businesses opened early (clothing stores, book shops etc), seniors would appreciate the chance to shop without being pressured by the crowds or faster, younger walkers.

 12  0

5:47 pm on December 9, 2013

 Reply  Report

Andrew

Agreed. I enjoyed this one. Consider as a follow-up doing one on the people who meet early in public spaces to do tai chi. Whenever I happen across one of these groups, I am always impressed by how ad hoc their organization appears. They never seem associated with the actual mall or building where they conduct their exercise.

 8  0

10:37 am on December 10, 2013

 Report