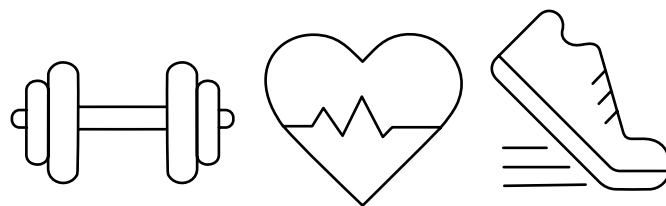




Sailing through **life**

In a small-town church gym,
disco music and determination
are helping Oklahomans stay
strong, steady and connected



BY JILL MEADOR

On a Thursday morning at the First Christian Church in Chandler, “Boogie Shoes” by KC and the Sunshine Band is playing as the friendly chatter in the room continues to increase. A sea of pink and red shirts file into the gym, each person greeting another with a warm smile. For the next hour, this small community will encourage one another through a Staying Active and Independent for Life (SAIL) class workout.

Jennifer Sayre, Oklahoma Department of Health Services (ODHS) District 3 health educator, found an advertisement for the SAIL program in an assisted living facility and immediately started finding a way to teach the program in her district.

“District 3 covers seven Oklahoma counties and we’re a rural health department,” Sayre says. “So as soon as the Oklahoma Department of Health Services approved us to start this program, we quickly got trained and the program started in September 2024.”

Sayre teaches two SAIL classes, one in Chandler and the other in Prague. Both classes average about 30 participants and have around 60 people enrolled. Currently, classes are offered in eight Oklahoma counties and over 200 people are actively participating in a SAIL class statewide.

More Than a Physical Benefit

Each class has a music element to it.

“My class loves classic disco,” Sayre says. “They are always singing and adding little dance moves, and they often say, ‘This reminds me of when I was a teenager.’”

While the program is geared towards older adults, anyone over 18 years old can attend a class.

“We have a vastly diverse group of people and interests, from a cafeteria worker to a biochemist,” Sayre says.

Age really is just a number says Terry Grissom, ODHS

District 3 health educator supervisor.

“We’ve got people that turn it up a notch and start breaking a sweat,” he says, “and we have others that use a cane when they come in and do the workouts sitting down.”

The class is broken down into five different sections: warm-up, aerobics, balance, strengthening and stretching.

“Strength training is so important for everybody,” he says, “but for the older population it is vital.”

The physical benefits of reduced pain or better sleep isn’t the only thing keeping the regulars coming back each week.

“We know from research that social isolation is really tough on older adults,” Grissom says. “Jennifer does a phenomenal job of connecting with her participants, and we genuinely love teaching the class because we get to help people we’ve known our whole lives.”

This program has rekindled friendships and sparked camaraderie, so the mental benefit is just as great, Sayre adds.



■ PHOTOS BY JILL MEADOR



"There have even been days where I've driven past the parking lot 30 minutes after the class ended and there's still a group outside talking," she says.

Building Community

Marsha Green and Phyllis Duncan are SAIL class participants and longtime volunteer instructors who also teach Tai chi and yoga classes.

"I retired from Tinker Air Force Base in 2009 after 35 years of service, and this quickly became an outlet for me to stay healthy," Green says.

The class has become more than just a workout; it is a social activity for this small community.

"We have a lot of ladies and gentlemen in their 80s, even some in their 90s, and SAIL gives them a great reason to get out and interact with other people," Duncan says.

The Tai chi class Green and Duncan teach has become a popular add-on to the regular SAIL classes.

Tai chi improves balance, which deteriorates as people age. Most people think Tai chi is like kung fu, but it is not. The goal is to just move and work on breathing techniques, Green says. The movements can be modified to the participants capabilities, meaning it can be done sitting, standing or anything in between, she adds.

"Even if you have an injury, the class is great for whatever state you're in," Duncan says. "In addition to the improved balance, it gets you into a routine of staying physically and mentally fit as you get older."

People are making new acquaintances every time they come to a class, Duncan adds, and it opens doors to be more involved in this rural community.

"We have one lady in our group that teaches water coloring classes, and so several of them have started

going to those as well," Duncan says.

The classes are completely free and open to anyone of any age, Green adds. "Phyllis and I are both in our 70s," Green says, "and the strength these classes have helped us build has benefited us in our everyday tasks like going up and down stairs."

Many of the SAIL attendees are very active outside the classes as well, says Scott Haywood, ODHS District 3 communications specialist.

"If this is the only thing they do, it is better than doing nothing," he adds, "and maybe they're also building that confidence and endurance to keep doing the other things they love."

Being able to overcome daily challenges has become inspiring to others in their communities.

"Terry and Jennifer have created something special with SAIL," Haywood says. "It's not only allowing people to have a better quality of life, but it's extending a sense of community which is probably the biggest impact."

OKL

"SAIL is an evidence-based fall prevention program centered around a strength, balance and fitness program." The class targets adults 65 or older and occurs 2-3 times a week for one-hour sessions. The program was founded in Washington state and recognized as a Title IIID – Evidence Based Program by the Administration of Aging in 2012. This recognition allowed other states to use federal funding to open the SAIL doors to more communities.



To bring a class to your county, scan the QR to fill out a form.