



Paulette McMillan (left) works out on the lap bar while Eleanor Getting does leg exercises. Both secretaries, they are at the gymnastics and fitness center every day at noon.

'Like play'

Toddlers jump into gymnastics classes

By Mary Jane Muiyenberg
special writer

Young Gina arched her 3-year-old body to imitate the lithe, young gymnasts working on uneven parallel bars. "I'm gonna be like them when I get big," she said.

Every Saturday, Gina and her mother, Linda Finkelstein, drive the 15 minutes from their Birmingham home to the tots' gym class at the Rochester Gymnastic and Fitness Center, 1855 Northfield, Rochester. There Gina and other 3 and 4-year-olds are given lessons in pre-gymnastic skills that teach movement and body coordination.

It's like play when the toddlers hop to the red section of a big, multicolor parachute, put their ears on the blue section, do sit-squats on the trampoline, or walk to the end of the beam, ring the bell and walk back.

"Children who start pre-gymnastics before age 5 have less fear to overcome than those who start later," explained Karen Pfister, fitness director of the center. "Their bodies are shaped by gymnastics as they grow, and they remain aware and interested in physical fitness as adults."

The center has classes for children as young as 2, if they work out with their mothers. Adults can choose from several fitness and exercise programs which may include progressive resistance equipment, floor exercises to music, and aerobic dance. Workshops on mental and physical health such as assertiveness training for women, nutrition, stress reduction, diet and CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) are also offered.

ELEANOR GETTINGS of Rochester and Paulette McMillan of Romeo are typical of the adults who take the center's training. Both secretaries, one older, one younger, they work together near the center and go there to work out during their lunch hours. Each

work day they alternate floor exercises with equipment workouts. "I don't care about inches, I just like feeling better," said Ms. Gettings.

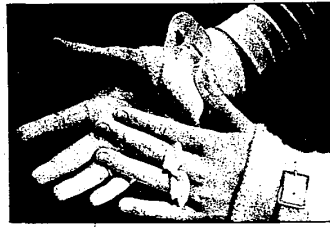
There is also a special program for overweight teens, which aims at changing behavioral habits through diet, exercise and the support of a group.

The center was opened last summer by Ms. Pfister of Bloomfield Hills, and her partner, Dave Begian. Almost immediately, school-age gymnasts showed up to use the equipment to maintain or enlarge their skills over the summer when school gyms are not open.

Among them were the young gymnasts Gina Finkelstein admired. They are the gymnastic "stars" of the center, with ambitions to reach the Olympics one day. Kim McFadyen, 12, Kristin Dych, 13, and Wendy Comeau, 13, train at the center all year long. Their parents belong to a club that raises money to take them and other qualified gymnasts to competition around the country.

DAVE BEGIAN directs the gymnastics program. "We follow the U.S. Gymnastics Federation rules with our age group developmental programs," he explained. "Right now Kim, Kristin and Wendy are our best Class 2 gymnasts. Class 1 is for advanced gymnasts working toward the Olympic level of competition."

Begian, a former Farmington High School gymnast, earned a scholarship in gymnastics at Central Michigan University, then trained gymnasts at area centers before founding the Rochester Center with Ms. Pfister. Whatever the age, Pfister said physical conditioning can enhance one's life. "I believe physical fitness and behavioral changes work together to change our attitudes," she said. "If we work on one and not the other, we don't realize our potential and we don't get full enjoyment out of living."



Chalk and leather pads help protect the youthful gymnasts' hands as they work on difficult exercise routines.



Seen from directly below, Kim McFadyen, 12, soars through an exercise routine that draws gasps of appreciation from onlookers.



Like many toddlers who attend classes at the center, Gina Finkelstein dreams of one day being able to do the intricate floor-exercise routines that are now routine for the older students.

Staff photos by Dick Kelley



Kristin Dych, 13, is one of three young gymnasts who are called the 'stars' of the center. She hopes one day to reach the Olympics.



Dave Begian, who once was on Farmington High School's team of gymnasts, works with 13-year-old Wendy Comeau to further her chances of one day being considered for Olympic competition. But whatever the age, Begian and his partner, Karen Pfister, believe that physical conditioning can enhance one's life.