

"Breathe in that positivity and relaxation. Bring yourself to that beautiful place in nature your mind takes you to first."

Fitness coordinator Elira Ben-Avari, speaking to her students at Lake Port Square retirement community



PHOTOS BY GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Roy Tuttle (right) and other seniors enjoy yoga at the Lake Port Square retirement community in Leesburg.

LEESBURG RETIREES REMAIN FIT, ACTIVE

By Emily Fuggetta

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In a carpeted room at the Lake Port Square retirement community, Ruth Morris, 87, gets moving to a backdrop of calming music and the chirping of birds that live in the chimney.

Morris participates in yoga classes, which she says loosen her joints and prepare her for afternoon walks.

"I feel great after the classes," Morris said. "It revs me up."

The yoga classes Morris and the other Lake Port residents take are taught by Elira Ben-Avari, 46, fitness coordinator since 2008. Ben-Avari guides residents through stretches, deep breathing and light exercise during the six yoga, chair-aerobics and Strong for Life balance classes she teaches each week.

Ben-Avari has been interested in health and natural healing all her life, but when she began studying yoga in 1991 while attending college in Boca Raton, something clicked.



Elira Ben-Avari, Lake Port Square's fitness coordinator, leads a group of seniors during a yoga class last week. Ben-Avari also guides residents through balance and chair-aerobics classes every week.

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"It left me feeling completely centered and calm," she said. Over the next 16 years, Ben-Avari studied different forms of yoga, completed intensive mastery programs in the forests of Canada and opened the Yoga Central studio in Tavares.

"I thought, what [could be a] more fulfilling pursuit than to be able to share this practice?" she said of yoga, which she describes as an "incredible workout inside and out."

"The older you get, the more important your life is," Ben-Avari said. "It's rewarding at every age, but with seniors, it shows them how important it is to keep moving."

Roy Tuttle, 91, takes that message to heart. Tuttle takes twice-daily walks around the community's pond and plays pingpong and volleyball every week.

He frequently attends square dances and was one of the first to sign up for yoga when Lake Port Square began offering the classes about six years ago after taking part in a study by Boston University's Roybal Center.

"I've been active all my life, and I really enjoy it," Tuttle said. "It just gives you a lift."

Ben-Avari said she has watched her Lake Port Square students become happier, more flexible and more centered. The community also offers personal training, resident-led fitness classes and, beginning in the fall, Chinese qigong classes.

During balance classes, participants chat and joke with one another as Ben-Avari guides them through deep-breathing exercises and stretches. At the beginning and end of the classes, she helps them focus their energy.

"Breathe in that positivity and relaxation," she tells them. "Bring yourself to that beautiful place, in nature your mind takes you to first."

After peaceful cool-down periods, participants wrap their arms around themselves in big, congratulatory hugs.

"During these classes, you can completely let go and focus," Ben-Avari said. "It's permission to just sit there and be."

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