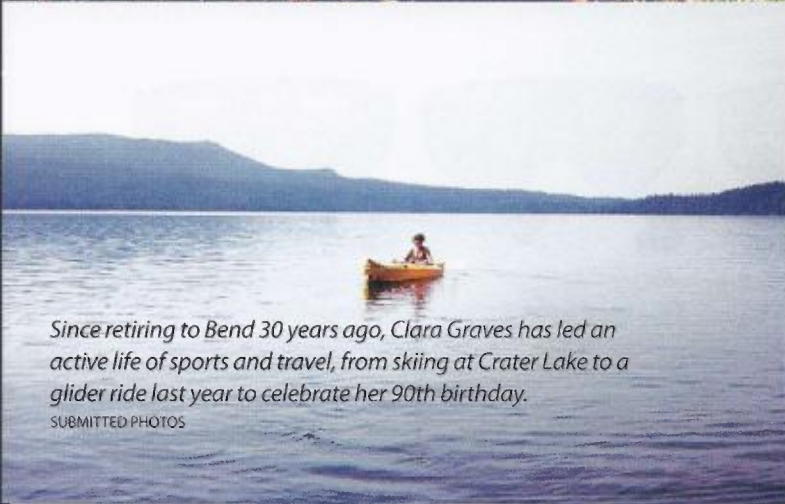
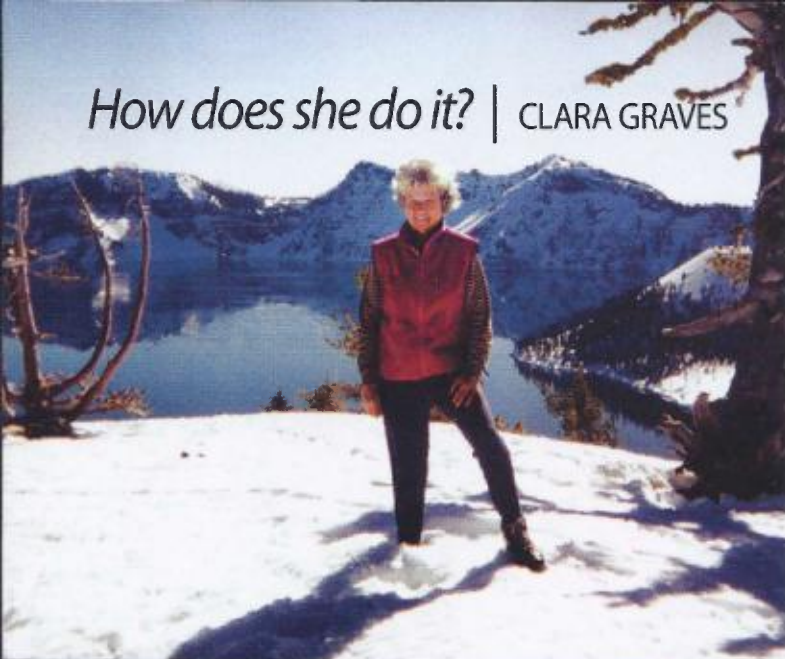


How does she do it? | CLARA GRAVES



Since retiring to Bend 30 years ago, Clara Graves has led an active life of sports and travel, from skiing at Crater Lake to a glider ride last year to celebrate her 90th birthday.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS

90? Who, me?

Clara Graves is having too much fun to worry about a little thing like age

BY MARKIAN HAWRYLUK

If there's any doubt the Central Oregon lifestyle leads to a long and healthy life, one need only look at Clara Graves. A war bride who retired to Bend 30 years ago for the sunny weather and recreational opportunities, she has taken advantage of all the region has to offer to keep healthy and active late in life. Last year, the staff at Juniper Swim & Fitness Center, along with her classmates from the water aerobics class, threw her a party to celebrate her 90th birthday.

That's 90 ...

A party at the gym ...

The same gym where she mock pole danced the previous year.

That's pole dancing ... at 89 ... at the gym ...

"I don't feel old," Graves said. "I just don't feel it."

Living to 100 or even 90 may be part luck, but there's definitely a science behind it. Researchers have identified several common traits among those who live to be 100. They stay active all their lives. They don't smoke and drink only moderately. They inherit good genes from their parents and eat a diet low in red meat and heavy on plants. And they have strong social connections.

That describes Graves to a T.

Her father lived to 67, but her mother to 90. She grew up with three brothers, and spent her childhood playing the same sports they did. She played football and tin-can hockey, climbed trees and telephone poles. She married Perry Graves in 1942 in an Army wedding ceremony that involved putting the bride and groom on chairs perched atop artillery pack mules. They raised four children in southern Illinois, including a daughter who later worked as a BLM geologist in Prineville. The Graveses had visited Central Oregon in the early '80s to house-sit for her while she took an extended trip. Upon returning to southern Illinois, Perry Graves asked his wife if she'd like to move out to Bend.

"I'll pack my bags tomorrow," she replied.

Their friends couldn't believe they were moving to Oregon.



ROB KERR

Every Friday, Clara Graves, 90, gets together with a group of young friends — in their 70s and 80s — for lunch and a game of cards. Research suggests that having strong social connections is a key component to a long life.

"I didn't want to say it, but it sure beats southern Illinois," she quipped. Southern Illinois summers were hot and humid, and while Graves bowled and golfed there, it didn't have the outdoor opportunities that Bend did. Once in Central Oregon, Graves learned to ski with nordic skiing guru Virginia Meissner.

"We would go to three different places to ski (each week) and the groups were really big," she recalls. "So I really met a lot of people."

When Graves had been skiing for only a year, Meissner suggested they ski down to Elk Lake. "It's all downhill," Meissner told her, when Graves expressed some doubts.

"That first hill going down to Todd Lake, I thought I was going to die," Graves said. "I was going so fast, I was afraid to fall because I thought I would kill myself. I was athletic, but putting those two long boards on my feet changed things!"

The Graveses skied in the winter and hiked and played golf in the summer, becoming fast friends with a group of active people. Several years ago, Clara Graves gave up skiing and golf after a knee replacement, and transitioned to exercising at Juniper.

"I missed it a lot the first year, but I changed my lifestyle," she said. "I miss the people and all the friends that I was doing that with."

Of course, most of the people she skied with aren't skiing any

more either.

Each Friday, she still gets together with her circle of friends to play cards — dummy rummy, she calls it.

"We go to each other's houses and it's fun," she said. "But they're all young."

Those friends are 85, 79 and 71. You know, young women ...

"Most of my friends my age are dead or in assisted living," Graves said, matter-of-factly.

Graves was a social smoker back in Illinois but soon discovered few smoked in Bend, so she quit too. On her doctor's advice, she changed her diet to mostly chicken or fish protein, with lots of vegetables and salads, and few desserts.

"It's not that difficult (staying in shape)," she said. "But some people like to eat and not exercise."

At 68, Lynn Hanlon, a friend from water aerobics class, is young enough to be Graves' daughter. In fact, her mother just died last year at age 90. She admits to being inspired by Graves' seemingly endless supply of life energy.

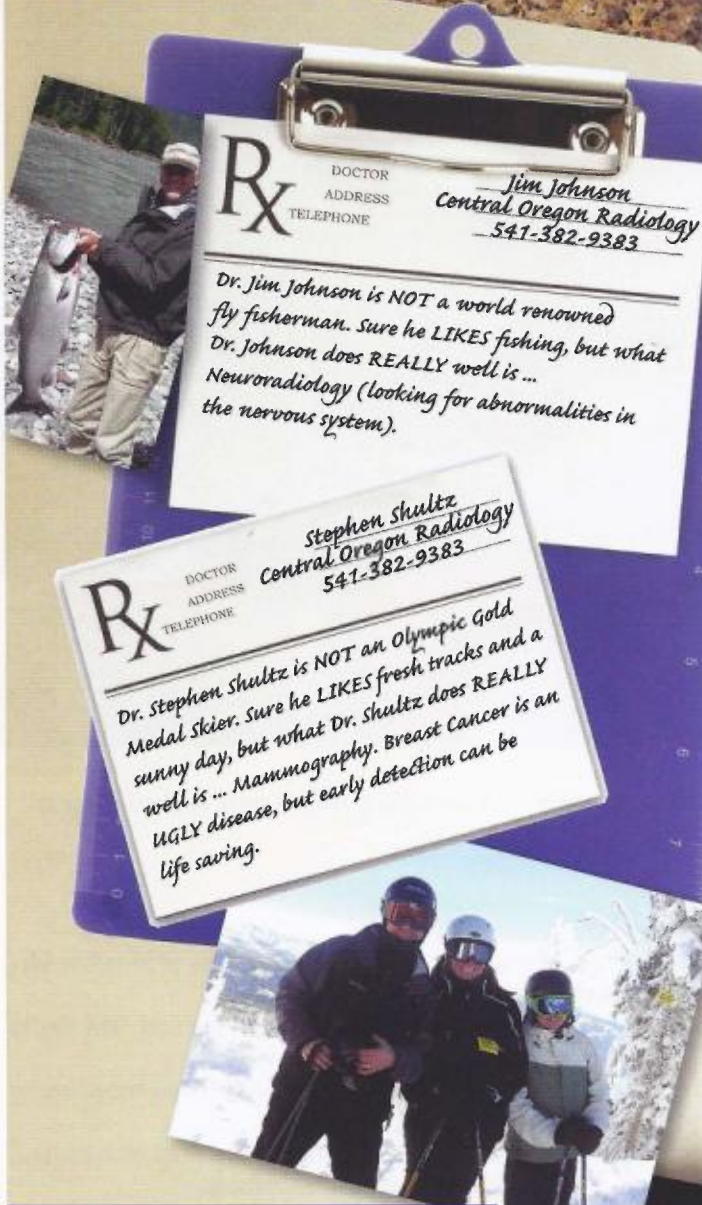
"I attribute her longevity to her basically sunny personality," she said. "She's really Suzy Sunshine."

Hanlon thinks part of Graves' longevity is due to the fact that while

*"I don't feel old.
I just don't feel it."*

— Clara Graves

EVERY PICTURE ... HAS A STORY



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she was always active, sports were more a social than a competitive outlet for her.

"She never really put herself to the task of being the best, so she didn't have the stress of competition," Hanlon said. "She only had the enjoyment of the sport."

At her water aerobics class, Graves has a reputation for entertaining the group.

"She's really a social butterfly at the pool. She may not always follow instructions, but she's definitely leading the parade," Hanlon said. "Sometimes she may not be moving exactly the way the teacher is telling us or she may be moving her jaw simultaneously."

Betty Bromley, another pool regular, confirmed that Graves keeps up the chatter, but with good reason.

"You know, when you've lived that long," she explained, "then you have a lot to say."

Alli Jorgensen, who leads the aerobics class, said Graves stands in contrast to many of the older patrons of the club, who often dwell on the negative, focusing on their health problems or other challenges.

"She comes in and she is just a light for that class," Jorgensen said. "She's always smiling. She always wants to make the class fun. She's willing to try anything and to make anybody laugh."

Instructors can often get frustrated when class participants are chatting rather than following instructions, but with Graves, she said it's worth it because she helps make the class fun for everyone.

"She's the one that's facing you, she's looking at you, she's smiling at you, she's engaging you. There are some that are barely moving, they're just there to chat," Jorgensen said. "Her energy is worth the trade-off."

Graves' speech hasn't slowed down either. She still regales her cohorts with tales in a rapid-fire staccato, suggesting her mind has stayed as active as her body.

"I'm at that place — my husband is too — where we're starting to slow down," she said. "There comes a time when your body does wear out. Your mind doesn't really wear out. It's kind of frustrating. You want to do things."

The difference, of course, is that so many others have experienced that slowdown in their 70s and 80s. Graves is quick to point out there are other nonagenarians in Central Oregon who remain active. One friend is 90 and still plays tennis. A man in her daughter's hiking group still hits the trail at 92. Two friends that Graves hiked with lived till 98 and 100. And she knows two sisters who still walk to the grocery store at ages 94 and 98. (It's safer than driving, they tell her.)

How much of that is attributable to Central Oregon? It's debatable, although a study last year found that Deschutes County residents had a significantly higher than average life expectancy. Graves has certainly made the most of the local resources. She's taken balance classes at the Bend Senior Center and healthy living classes at St. Charles Bend. And she's spent a good part of her time outdoors, basking in the Central Oregon sun, getting her dose of vitamin D.

"She's definitely solar powered," Hanlon said. "When she finally goes off to heaven, she'll find a beach chair and face south and get some sun in." ■