

TELLING STORY

Creating Lifelong Healthy Habits Through Youth Fitness

As parents, we all know that the best time to establish healthy habits for our children is in their youth. The trick is finding things they themselves enjoy and role models that can motivate them (especially since often if ideas come from parents, many kids just see it as nagging!). Understanding this, the JCC is proud to offer many pathways to children's wellness, with the youth fitness program a true highlight. The magic is in the incredible trainers and coaches, who are specifically dedicated to youth and know exactly how to inspire children and teens to crave and keep lifelong healthy routines.

Leah Fink and Samantha Hirsh are great examples. Now sophomores in Tenafly High School, they became best friends in second grade and have been actively training together at the JCC since they were 9 years old. Leah was never a fan of group sports, so her mom, Leslie, wanted to find a young female trainer for Leah – someone who could excite her about working out and serve as a

role model for health and fitness. Being a longtime member, who loves to swim and workout at the JCC herself, Leslie immediately knew she would find what she was looking for at the JCC. She met with Keri Thoren, the Athletics Director, and after specifying her desire for a trainer that her daughter could learn from and relate to, Keri volunteered on the spot. Delighted, Leslie returned home and got Leah excited about working out with Keri.

"I loved the idea of getting a private trainer because it made me feel grown up and it could be tailored to me," says Leah. "I thought it would be even more fun with a friend, so I asked Samantha, and we began what has been an incredible, seven-year journey with Keri, who has become like a big sister to us."

The girls started working out in the Benjamin Bergen Youth Fitness Center, where they learned how to use the fitness machines and set some initial goals. Thanks to Keri and her amazing energy and spirit, one of the first things they learned was how much fun working out could be. They lifted weights

to build strength, and focused on flexibility, balance, and endurance as well. The results made them happy and they were quickly hooked. They came twice a week after school, and Leah even began coming a third day on her own. By the time they entered 6th grade, they transitioned to the adult gym, took on more challenges, and whenever their motivation ebbed, Keri would spice up the mix by introducing circuit training and obstacle courses or bringing them to the pool or tennis courts in warm weather so they could train outdoors. They loved the variety and breadth of their routines and Keri became a true friend and mentor, who boosted their confidence and made them feel capable, both in and out of the gym.

“When it comes to youth fitness, the only way to make it successful is to make it fun and exciting,” says Keri. “Fourth graders don’t come to a gym with a set of goals they are looking to achieve, so you need to engage them as both a trainer and life coach at the same time to build a connection. Only then can you get them excited about the whole idea of fitness and healthy lifestyles.

For example, when Leah and Samantha first started, they’d show up after school. They might be tired or had a problem with a friend. They’d need to talk and unwind and I’d take my cues from them. We became really close, and over time, we built a strong bond, which opened doors that allowed me to continually find new ways to motivate and challenge them.

“As they got a bit older, they started doing more serious cardio work to build endurance. They’d come back to me, reporting how they no longer got winded on family hikes or how they had taken an interest in cooking their own healthy foods. They saw the results paying off. At one point, they told me they wanted to take part in the Rubin Run, so I trained them even more rigorously than ever to prepare them and they’ve been running the 5K ever since. And every year when they finish, they celebrate their success by jumping into Leah’s pool in their sweats and Rubin Run T-shirts!”

Seven years is a long time and both Leah and Samantha credit the JCC for shaping their lives and values in ways they never expected. They’ve definitely embraced wellness and good nutrition as a lifetime habit and share a common aspiration to be active and to eat well. But their experience has matured them in deeper ways as well. They share a strong and growing commitment to each other and to Keri, who has played a huge role in their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.





“School gets more difficult and demanding each year, but we never miss our sessions,” says Samantha. “Leah and I pursue different tracks at school, so we don’t have many classes together, but coming to the J several times a week has kept us really close. It’s our absolute go-to place for personal growth. We’ve become friends with all the other trainers, like Kimani, who’s called us the “little people” forever, and Yenny, who always has something kind and encouraging to say to us.

“I can’t say enough about what an incredible friend and mentor Keri has become over the years. I often imagine coaches as someone older, who might be intimidating, but Keri was like a sister from the start - a perfect match for teenagers like us. We can tell her anything! Half our posts on Facebook include photos and comments that include her, and she has become our emotional rock. She came to both our mitzvah’s and one day, we hope to be invited to her wedding. We are truly that close!”

Leah and Samantha look forward to continuing their JCC journey with Keri for the next two years, when they will graduate and head off to college confident, proud, and prepared for their next chapter. But for now, they are happy to be coming to the J, where they’ve been learning and growing nearly all their lives. When they

aren’t together, Leah plays squash, volunteers as a tutor in the Tenafly school district as part of a club, and enjoys beating her older brother in arm wrestling. Samantha, who learned to swim at the J as a kid, plays tennis and tutors third graders at her Hebrew school, Temple Sinai. And during the summer, they work alongside Keri in her sports camps. It’s been an amazing trajectory from the nine-year-olds they were when their journey began.

“It’s been incredibly rewarding and personally satisfying to work with Leah and Samantha,” concludes Keri. “And I am so proud to see them evolving into such confident young women. It literally brings tears to my eyes. They don’t call our sessions workouts anymore. They call it ‘their time with Keri’, which is really sweet, and I’m so glad to share in their lives.”

The JCC features a wide range of Youth Fitness programs that have been created especially for kids between the ages of 8 and 15 - a perfect place for health conscious youth to get the ultimate athletic experience on all the latest sports and fitness equipment, including treadmills, bikes, body bars, resistance bands, abdominal benches, free weights and three-station universals. They can also take part in running clinics, multi-sport programs, Tae Kwon Do, swimming, life guard training and swim clubs. And best of all, the staff of qualified trainers are always on hand to supervise and coach young people to achieve their fitness goals. For more information on ways to strengthen your body, enhance your self-image, and make new friends, contact Keri at 201.408.1476.