

Fitness exercises

‘CURVES removes the barriers that keep women from exercising,’ says Gary Heavin about the chain of fitness clubs he set up. ‘Many women feel that they don’t have much time to keep fit. They feel intimidated at the idea of working out, that staff are unsupportive and that a full gym workout takes a lot of time.’

Inside Gary’s clubs there are no treadmills or cross-trainers. Instead, members complete a 30-minute circuit, which combines cardiovascular exercise with strength training through the use of hydraulic resistance machines. Women of all abilities, ages, shapes and sizes are able to work out without it feeling too much like work. Fitness coaches are on hand to supervise and encourage the members.

‘Women are social creatures, and exercising together provides them with a community of support,’ explains Gary. ‘They can help each other to acquire the habit of exercise and to stick to a healthy diet.’

When the first Curves club opened in Texas, something about it clicked with women. They liked the workouts. They saw results. They kept coming back. It was not long before members wanted to open their own clubs across the States.

‘McDonald’s took 25 years to reach 6,000 locations,’ Gary says. ‘Curves achieved that goal in seven years. People ask me how we did it, and I believe that there are two answers. First of all there was a great need for such a club. At the time women didn’t have a place to go where they could exercise. They were second-class citizens in the more conventional gyms. We found that we could open in small communities that didn’t have a gym at all.’

‘Secondly, we were a club with values. We grew almost entirely by word of mouth. People don’t say nice things about you unless you are trustworthy, show integrity and serve them. I approach each day with an attitude of servanthood. I want to serve my members and my franchisees and help them to achieve what they want.

‘I made it clear to the members that my staff would support them as they worked out. But I also let members know that I expected certain things

GARY HEAVIN is a bit of a fitness fanatic. Back in 1992 he and his wife Diane founded Curves, a women’s health and fitness club in Texas, USA. The club became an overnight success – so Gary opened another one. Fast-forward 18 years and there are more than 10,000 Curves clubs across the globe, with some four million members. Business is booming. Gary tells Claire Brine he believes he has been successful because he built his business on biblical principles



FOUNDER:
Gary Heavin

guru faith

from them in return. I wanted them to show up when they said they would and work with us on achieving their fitness goals. I always tried to uphold the Christian values of honesty, integrity, service and unity.'

One way Gary promotes those values is by his charity work. Financially, Curves has enabled him to pile on the pounds (or dollars), which he is keen to donate to charitable organisations. He encourages his club members to do the same.

Each year the clubs across the globe hold a 'food drive'. Members donate items of food which are then distributed to people in need. Since 2004 the project has handled more than 27,000 tonnes of food.

'One of the principles we promote is the law of reciprocity,' Gary says. 'That means that if a person is willing to use their resources to meet the needs of others, then that person will be given more resources. We want to teach our members to be givers. If they bless others,

Curves

they will be blessed themselves.'

Gary's life may appear stuffed full of blessings, but he has known heartache and difficulty in the past.

'My mother suffered from being overweight,' he remembers. 'She had high blood pressure and depression. When she was 40 years old those things killed her. I was 13 at the time, and I was the person who found her body. I called the ambulance. I'm sure that tragedy has influenced me massively in what I've ended up doing with my life.'

'While I was studying for a pre-



FITNESS: clients exercise at their own pace

We promote the law of reciprocity

med degree at college I knew that I wanted to heal women. I wanted to prevent my mother's situation from happening to someone else.

'Before Curves, I opened my first women's health club when I was 20 years old, had five clubs by the time I was 25 and fourteen clubs at 30 years of age. I was a millionaire. Then I went bankrupt and lost everything.

'Although I had the enthusiasm of youth – which took me a long way – I was inexperienced. I made some big mistakes. I couldn't be in 14 clubs every day. I was spread too thin. Trying to ensure that my managers cared for the members as much as I did was difficult. Clubs need owners

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to look after their members, not hundreds of managers. I realised that franchising was the way to grow.

'I had also branched out into men's fitness. Generally men don't mind working out in front of women. But I had forgotten that it was women who really needed a place to go.

'Another problem was debt. I had built gyms with swimming pools, saunas and hot tubs – but those facilities were not used very much. I found that most people wanted to come in, work out and then shower at home. My spending didn't make sense.'

After trial and error Gary came up with the concept of Curves. It was to be a gym with a difference.

'I did away with all the frills. I simplified things. By running a more efficient club I made financial savings, which I passed on to the members so they could afford to work out.'

A first visit to a fitness club can be a daunting experience for women who may be out of shape, overweight or suffering from poor health. But the Curves slogan of 'no men, no make-up, no mirrors' helps put members at ease.

'Many women come to us out of desperation rather than hope,' says Gary. 'They may be tired of buying bigger clothes, tired of taking medication. Some are concerned about being attractive to their husbands.

'It's a shame that fear is what drives people to us, but our goal is to move



GATHERED:
a group class in progress

Many women come to us out of desperation

them from fear to hope – from desperation to satisfaction. We want to take the negatives that bring women here and convert them into positives which will keep women here. We show them that they can reach their goals. They can live healthier lives.

'I believe that if my mother had had the opportunity to go to one of my fitness clubs, she'd probably be alive today. Exercise is the most effective way to lose weight, relieve depression and reduce blood pressure.'

That may be the case, but many people still struggle to do enough of it. Some even put all their energy into avoiding exercise completely. Gary says that people need to make time for exercise so that it eventually becomes a habit.

'Even if our members despise working out, they need to do it to have a healthy life. Exercise improves a person's heart, muscles and joints.'

As well as informing his members of the benefits of keeping active, Gary has other good news to share through his work.

'I want the members to know that God loves them all,' he says. 'God wants an intimate relationship with us. He's a personal God who wants us to spend eternity with him. This is the truth and it's my responsibility to speak it. But whether they accept God or not is up to the individual.'

I became a Christian when I was 13 years old. I haven't always been a very good one. When I lost everything at the age of 30 God suddenly had my attention. I made a commitment to faith and became serious about living out the values of honesty and service, which reflect God's character.

'When I was 40 I had what I would call an epiphany. I was teaching 100 women about fitness and weight loss – which I had been doing for 20 years – and I realised that I was scanning the crowd for my mother's face. At that moment I felt that God revealed to me what he wanted my future to be. Later that year I founded Curves.

'I believe that when people do what God wants them to do, and they do it in a way that reflects God's character, they are blessed. I see my clubs as a blessing from God, which aims to help women find freedom from the addiction of



Some women are concerned about being attractive to their husbands



overeating and under-exercising.'

Today Curves is in good shape, running in some 80 countries. But Gary believes there are still more positives to come.

'We are open in China and India, and are about to open in Russia. Those three countries make up two thirds of the world's population. I want us to be the McDonald's of the fitness world.'

'I want people to change the way they diet. We teach people how they

GIVERS: members donate food for people in need

can go on a temporary diet to produce permanent results. Perpetual dieting causes only failure. We want to free women from any oppression they feel in relation to food.

'I also want to change people's thinking about health. Right now people don't get medical help unless they are ill. I think that's dumb. Why not provide services to prevent people becoming ill in the first place. In the UK we are working with the

Government to look at ways of promoting wellness instead of illness.

'As a Christian, it is my job to use whatever gifts God has given me and go wherever he sends me. I need to be obedient to him. You never know how God may want to use you to help others.'

● For more information visit curves.com