

LA JOLLA LIGHT

Finding fame and fitness

Elaine LaLanne shares her story with La Jollans for Community Center series

BY ELISABETH FRAUSTO
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Elaine LaLanne offered advice intertwined with stories about her journey through fame and fitness during an online talk presented by the La Jolla Community Center as part of its Distinguished Speaker Series.

The June 9 event on Zoom opened with Community Center Executive Director Nancy Walters introducing LaLanne, “known as the first lady of physical fitness. At 94, her appearances are dynamic and life-changing to people of all ages.”

LaLanne, born and raised Elaine Doyle in Minneapolis, said she vacationed in California in 1945 and stayed, attending the UCLA-NBC radio institute, which led her to San Francisco, where she joined a modeling agency.

“That changed my whole life,” LaLanne said.

Too short for runway modeling, she was sent to a television station. “Television was brand new,” she said. “They were looking for someone to do a commercial.”

A radio host invited her to create a TV show, which LaLanne said bewildered her. “I didn’t have a clue” how to do that, she said.

LaLanne began booking 90-minute shows with a 12-piece orchestra and guests. One guest was Jack LaLanne, billed as “a guy who can do push-ups through your whole show,” she said.

LaLanne said Jack, who gained popularity as a fitness icon through his own TV series, inspired her to give up “my chocolate doughnuts and cigarettes and focus on my health. I decided I was going to work out with Jack.”

A few years later, “we danced at a company party and we’ve been dancing ever since.”

Jack and Elaine LaLanne married and continued their work in the fitness industry with videos, gyms, books and appearances until Jack’s death in 2011 at age 96. “We’ve laughed through life,” Elaine said.

The laughter, she said, is what gets her through adversity. “Have fun and laugh and smile,” she said. “It’s very important to have a sense of humor.



Elaine LaLanne speaks via Zoom for the La Jolla Community Center's Distinguished Speaker Series.

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There’s a positive and a negative way to go through life.”

LaLanne said choosing positivity has been of great comfort to her in times of immense sadness. When her daughter died at age 21, “I could go ‘pity party’ or I could go through life because I had my life to live,” LaLanne said. “I decided I’ve gotta do what I have to do. That’s the road I took, a positive road.”

LaLanne said journalist and author Maria Shriver once asked her during an interview for three words that have helped her. That led LaLanne to formulate her life’s motto: “Attitude, resistance, consistency; that’s my ‘ARC’ of life.”

Her attitude is that “anything is possible if you believe you can make it happen,” she said.

Resistance, she said, covers everything from “resisting the foods that are undermining your health” to “resistance in exercise,” giving an example of clenching her muscles to create resistance so muscles build strength.

LaLanne said “being consistent in anything you do,” from workouts to eating habits, is important. “Ask yourself, ‘What is this going to do for me?’” she said.

LaLanne later added an “H,” shifting her motto to “ARCH”: “Harmony. If you

do all these things, you end up with a lot of harmony,” she said.

LaLanne answered participants’ questions read by Walters. The first was whether LaLanne can still do push-ups, to which she replied: “Yes, I can. We can all do push-ups!” She then demonstrated a modified push-up against a counter for those who can’t get down on the floor.

Another participant asked LaLanne what she believes is the biggest obstacle to senior citizens starting an exercise program. “Getting them motivated,” she said. “If you show them and tell them about someone who has actually changed their life through it and make it simple ... that’s how Jack got started on television. Everything on his shows were simple, and that’s what I try to do.”

She then demonstrated several simple exercises, mostly done from a chair, to help keep people moving. She encouraged participants to start with a few minutes a day, a habit she wrote about in her 2019 book “If You Want to Live, Move! Putting the Boom Back into Boomers.”

“I really feel we should learn to visualize what we want out of life,” she said. “When you visualize, you become positive.”

She said she hopes people won’t allow setbacks to derail their goals. “I have macular degeneration,” she said. “I’ve lost a lot of my eye[sight] ... [but] I’m writing another book [about Jack].”

LaLanne urged participants to maintain “lifelong learning,” saying the La Jolla Community Center is a “youth center. It might be a senior center, but if you’re going [there], you’re going to a youth center.”

She also advocated for introspection, saying: “You have a story. Your story can change your life.”

The Community Center’s next Distinguished Speaker Series online event will feature Jacopo Annese at 10 a.m. Tuesday, July 14, on the topic “The New Science of the Brain: Neurodiversity and Cognitive Fitness.” To learn more, visit ljcommunitycenter.org/dss. ♦



Fitness expert Elaine LaLanne exercises daily at age 94, including push-ups.