

Where's the Joy?

*Right
here!*

The Canyon Ranch Institute Life Enhancement Program (CRI LEP) engages people in a serious, intense, life-changing and extremely grown-up experience – all the more reason that participants love to slap on the big red noses!



The dashing Gary Freifeld with the stunning Valerie Costas.

"It's such a simple thing, those red noses, but it completely changes the atmosphere and flavor of what's going on," says Gary Freifeld, an RN with Berkshire Health Systems in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and a member of the Core Team in its south county CRI LEP. "When I went through the Life Enhancement Center myself at the Ranch in Tucson, I stated that my focus would be on adding more joy and fun in my life. Then I got home and was assigned to teach 'Where's the Joy?' to our CRI LEP groups. Kismet!"

As an ICU nurse at Berkshire Medical Center, Gary's days are often difficult. He constantly sees patients who are gravely ill, frequently due to lifestyle. "I was getting frustrated," he says. "I wanted to get in front of this, help people make positive choices now so they don't wind up in ICU or with chronic illness. That's what the CRI LEP is about."

The CRI LEP is offered free to people in low-income communities. Among their weekly nutrition, fitness and lifestyle classes, one standout favorite is "Where's the Joy?" It's a chance to unwind, bond as a group and experience what it's like to find joy and laughter "in the moment."

“... What can you do except laugh?”

“I start by showing a cool video of snow monkeys,” Gary says. “Watching animals takes you to a special place, not thinking about yesterday or tomorrow. Then we play games with balls and paddles, and we usually wind up with 15 minutes of hysterical laughter. Everyone’s in the moment then, and we talk about what that means and how it benefits their health. Being aware and mindful helps people make better decisions.”

Gary notes that fun and play are universal needs, just like peace, autonomy and meaning in life. “When you don’t have these things, it gets expressed in unhealthy ways – stress and not taking care of your body, for instance. The group talks about the physical, mental and social benefits of laughter, and we brainstorm about how we can increase it in our lives.”

At the CRI LEP in Savannah, Georgia, one of the Core Team members is Kathy Kurazawa. She shared an inspiring story while leading her own popular “Where’s the Joy?” class.

“I talked about the time I had to deliver something to the building across from my office,” she says. “First, I stopped in the restroom, though. Then I crossed the street, walking toward a café and a big picture window. A woman started yelling at me: ‘Lady, lady, your skirt is up!’ My whole backside was exposed. I fixed my skirt and noticed two men grinning at me. I just waved at them, and they waved back.”

Kathy’s animated and hilarious telling of the story had the group raucously laughing. Her attitude: What can you do except laugh?

“I could’ve gotten upset with those grinning men,” she says, “but I’d be the only one hurt by that. It’s the same thing at home – you lose the remote or someone’s little habits could drive you nuts, but what does it really matter in the scheme of things? I choose to laugh at life’s little foibles.”

Kathy’s and Gary’s healthy attitudes toward joy and laughter add a powerful element to the CRI LEP. It’s a great stress reducer, comes with a wealth of benefits and keeps program participants coming back for more. Years from now, when they meet each other on the street, they’ll still be saying, “Hey, where’s your nose?”

Valerie Costas is a CRI LEP graduate who was once a teacher, then a professional clown for more than 20 years. She touches people every day with her joy and laughter, which are generous, healthy and utterly contagious.

“In 2006, I was diagnosed with cancer,” Valerie says. “My daughter threw fabulous, fun parties for me since then, inviting friends I hadn’t seen since childhood. We’re making the most of each day. Gratitude opens a whole other world – and there’s so much to be thankful for.

“I’ve met talented, amazing people through the CRI LEP. We’re all inspired by each other in so many ways.” ●

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