



Ninety-year-old dancer Josie Huygie, center, line-dances the Cupid Shuffle with Denise Turner and Sandra Williams at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit.

Ageless Detroiter is role model for all

How 90-year-old Josie Huygie stays young

By Maureen McDonald

Six days a week Josie Huygie puts on a party dress and pretty shoes. She heads to a dance where she twirls and twists, hustles and harmonizes with the best dancers in Detroit. Despite a pinched nerve in her neck and assorted pains, she steps lively and charms all her partners.

Did we mention she's 90?

"I feel good around people who are doing things," Huygie says. "I go by myself and meet a whole set of new people, active people. Most of us come by ourselves."

With a spring in her step and sparkling eyes, she names all the dances at senior centers and Detroit Recreation Centers where a cast of regulars will whirl her around the floor or shake their hips in rhythm to the beat.

Huygie, a retired nurse for the City of Detroit's Health Department, believes exercise, especially dancing, is the key to a long and vital life. Over the

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years, she's been a wife (twice), mother to four children, factory worker, college student and breast cancer survivor, who roller skates and cycles.

Her biggest honor was being crowned Miss Senior America in 1989. She performed roller skating routines that got hearts thumping and cheers escalating. She hasn't slowed down much since, thanks to a driving passion for dance.

"Why do we dance?" asks Camille A. Brown, a director and choreographer on Broadway, who recently produced a TEDX talk on dance. "African-American social dances started as a way for enslaved Africans to keep cultural traditions alive and retain a sense of inner freedom. They remain an affirmation of identity and independence. We constantly explore the freedom of people and communities when they let loose and express themselves by dancing together."

Huygie would agree. "It feels good to be around people who are doing things. As you get older you have to go by yourself. The people in my building just want to sit and watch television. I get out and meet a whole new set of people, active people," she says.

There are line dances, ballroom dances or hustles at several Detroit Recreation Centers, round dancing at St. Patrick's Senior Center in Midtown and periodic "Hustles for Haiti" at the Sacred Heart Church in Eastern Market.

Almost 15 percent of people attending classes are over the age of 90 and they step just as lively as the 60-somethings, says Keith Flourney, general manager of operations for Detroit Recreation Centers.

"This is a positive way to exercise, mingle, interact and get out of the house," Flourney says.

Classes, which often include an instructor and a sound system, draw up to 150 members to the recreation center. People as young as 40 and as old as 96 come regularly.

The city's Recreation Department is looking at even more ways seniors can get fit. It extended hours of operation from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. at four centers and hopes to expand the remainder soon after the New Year.

Huygie enjoys classes at the recreation centers because they are offered in the daytime when she is happiest driving. Another plus is the St. Patrick Senior Center offers a hot lunch daily between noon and 1 p.m.

"I don't care if all the dancers are younger

than me," she says. "I'm here to have a good time." Her biggest challenge is conquering pain, but she works it.

"My neck may be stiff, my knee kills me, but I don't tell people. I pack up all my aches and pains and get out of here. After awhile the muscles loosen up and my feet are gliding across the floor. My body fills up with natural endorphins," says Huygie.

Huygie doesn't have time to make an ordeal out of pain. Her life has been centered around bicycling and roller skating since the 1960s when her children were young. She biked to work at a tool-and-die factory, working midnights so she could be up and ready to send her

kids off to school with packed lunches. On Saturday and Sunday she took her family and the Sunday school kids to the roller rink.

"I could walk into the roller rink and all my stress would melt away. It was inexpensive therapy and I'd meet many people," she says.

Until recently Josie rode her bike

daily on the Dequindre Cut, a linear park from the riverfront to Eastern Market. Her neck pain made biking less fun, but she can accommodate dancing as long as a gentleman doesn't go cheek to cheek.

If life is a dance, Huygie is always ready to boogie.

Where can you dance?

Check out the St. Patrick Senior Center at 58 Parsons in Detroit. There is ballroom dancing on Wednesday from 11 a.m. to noon and Thursday, from 9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. Belly dancing runs Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. If you're interested in dancing The Hustle, it is available Monday and Friday from 10 a.m.-11 a.m. and round dancing runs the second and fourth Tuesday from 10:15 - 11:15 a.m.

The Detroit Recreation Centers offer these classes:

- **Joseph Walker Williams Recreation Center** – Hustle and ballroom from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday.
- **The Adam Butzel Recreation Center** – senior dance square dancing Wednesday nights with a "caller" from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and Tuesday afternoons from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., and a ballroom dance for all adults Tuesday and Thursday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.
- **Northwest Activities Center** – ballroom and hustle classes from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, along with a hustle ballroom class from 10 a.m. to noon, "called" by the legendary Fast Freddy.

- **Farwell Recreation Center** – ballroom dancing on Tuesdays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., and hustle classes Monday and Wednesday from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Some classes have a \$3 fee and others are free. Check your local center.



Ninety-year-old Josie Huygie, left, poses with line-dance instructor Thomasenia Johnson at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit.



Josie Huygie (left) enjoys the camaraderie of dancing with friends like "Miss G" and sister Helen Gentry.

Photo: Paul Engstrom