



One step at a time, people are finding their footing at FYZICAL

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For more than half a century, Barbara and Harry Carlin have strolled through life side by side. They've raised two daughters, rooted for their favorite hockey team, danced at concerts and dined with friends.

But these days, the Carlins are teaming up in new ways, like jousting with foam noodles or booting soccer balls back and forth.

As always, they're taking those steps together – while trading their usual wisecracks.

"Come on," chuckles Harry, 77, "keep up with me."

"I am the better soccer player," says Barbara, 76.

For every kick, lunge and stride, the Carlins are securely wrapped in individual harnesses that connect them via cables to an aluminum track in the ceiling. The system helps people with balance issues stay in motion with no worries of falling or injuring themselves.



Barbara Carlin, left, kicks a soccer ball to her husband, Harry Carlin, as they both wear safety harnesses. Watching is physical therapist Celeste Blankenship.

Their hard work (and happy banter) all happen at the FYZICAL Therapy & Balance Centers' location in Cary, North Carolina, just outside Raleigh. [FYZICAL, a franchise company spanning more than 550 U.S. locations](#), offers programs that address fall prevention, balance and gait retraining, vestibular rehab, dizziness issues and more.

Headquartered in Sarasota, Florida, FYZICAL focused on balance to carve a niche in the booming U.S. physical therapy market, [which is](#)

[valued at more than \\$40 billion](#). And as America ages, the PT industry is projected to [grow by 3.5% annually through 2030](#).

Since the start of 2022, FYZICAL has opened more than 150 new locations, expanding its franchise base by 25%.



Peggy LaRue owns the FYZICAL franchise in Cary, North Carolina.

“Because there’s such a demand, we’re working even harder to expand our footprint nationwide,” says CEO Brian Belmont.

To help scale and to operate its network, the company leans on seven [Microsoft 365](#) apps: [Outlook](#), [Teams](#), [Excel](#), [Word](#), [PowerPoint](#), [SharePoint](#) and [OneDrive](#).

Those technologies enable FYZICAL and its franchises to communicate, schedule and hold meetings, forecast finances, build budgets and share training information among thousands of company therapists, executives say.

"Probably the biggest differentiator (in our business): We make a commitment that our physical therapists receive training and grow their careers by learning how to treat balance and vestibular issues – instruction you can't get anywhere else," Belmont says.

And because FYZICAL manages clinical data, it relies on the data-encryption features in Teams and Outlook, which helps the company adhere to patient-privacy laws, says Nick Allman, director of IT for FYZICAL.

"We've utilized Microsoft for over four years, which has allowed our team not to have to worry about the behind-the-scenes infrastructure. Rather, they focus on providing the best patient care possible," Allman says.

That attention to detail is evident at the FYZICAL center in Cary where Harry and Barbara Carlin have put in the work to stay on their feet – and sometimes get up on their toes.

"I've got everything in a little better control now," says Harry, whose exercise attire includes a Mad magazine sweatshirt with the famous tagline: "What, me worry?" Before starting at FYZICAL several months back, he fell at home a couple of times. "They work my butt off in here. They challenge you."



Harry Carlin chats with physical therapist Molly Keeffe.

"It's helping him. He hasn't fallen," Barbara adds. "It gets your confidence back because you can't fall in the harness."

Earlier that same day, she had attended a ballet class – her first in a long time. There, she saw her PT exercises pay off.

"When I used to do ballet, I could stand up on my toes. Then I couldn't do that anymore," she says. "But this morning, I was able to get on my toes! Not for long. But I did it!"

Nearby, franchise owner Peggy LaRue watched, listened and swiped a finger across her eyes.

"You're making me cry," LaRue says.

After a lengthy corporate career in consumer goods, LaRue yearned for more meaningful work. During the pandemic, she decided to make a big change and buy a FYZICAL franchise.

LaRue felt personally drawn to the mission, she says.

Balance problems related to vestibular (inner ear) dysfunction account for 10 million visits to U.S. medical clinics every year, according to the National Institutes of Health. Illnesses, injuries and advancing age also can cause unsteady feet, leading to dangerous falls.

In her own life, LaRue cared for her father as he dealt with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS. She saw firsthand how PT benefited his mind and body amid his decline.

"If we fall, we have other health risks – hospitalizations, infections and it takes longer to heal," LaRue says. "But even more, it's an age group that I love. I could hear their stories all day."



So she created a PT center that feels more like a community. Therapists Molly Keefe and Celeste Blankenship, and intern Vincent Leong evaluate each patient's gait, posture and muscle weaknesses, then create a customized plan to help them improve strength, flexibility and balance.

Their soothing space in Cary – equipped with exercise gear and machinery plus the safety harness system – is decorated with a pine tree mural and dark blue walls adorned with messages like "LOVE YOUR LIFE." A chorus of laughter accompanies the sessions along with encouraging words from staff and fellow patients.

Beyond cultivating that vibe, LaRue invests time in her clients' lives and their outcomes.



Mark Paulik, working with Vincent Leong, uses physical therapy to reduce the effects of Parkinson's disease.

There's Mark Paulik, 59, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in his 40s. To reduce its effects, he comes to FYZICAL twice a week to work with trainers on resistance bands and balance balls. Away from the gym, LaRue has accompanied Paulik on community walks held to raise money for Parkinson's research and care.

And there's Murray Stollwerk, 85. Two years ago, the retired pharmacist tripped on a raised sidewalk and fell face first on a manhole cover, shattering bones near his right eye.

The accident changed him emotionally. Forever a joke teller and a man about town, he became isolated. Eventually, someone in his neighborhood suggested he try FYZICAL.



After a fall, Murray Stollwerk has used physical therapy to regain a life on the go.

"I've had other physical therapists through the years, but here, they're more concerned about you, the person," Stollwerk says. "They've helped me tremendously with vision, balance and friendships."

That camaraderie starts with LaRue, who lives about a mile from Stollwerk's home. On Sundays, she drops by his place where he cooks her breakfast before they run errands together.

Their bond underscores why LaRue abruptly changed course to help folks rediscover their footing.

"If we take care of people like Murray, they're going to have better times with their children and grandchildren," LaRue says. "Like, now, I don't worry about Murray getting on an airplane to go see family. He's going to be fine."

That peace of mind fuels a larger realization for patients like Stollwerk, and for LaRue too: Time in the balance center is helping them all bring equilibrium back to their lives.

Top photo: Harry Carlin, in a safety harness, bats an exercise ball back to therapist Molly Keefe.

All photos by Christobal Perez/Azul Photography.

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