



At 96, Anne-marie Strickler (far right) is the "most seasoned" Mermaid. "The costumes are fabulous," she says.

Brethren Village's Grey Mermaids practice for their holiday show, Jan. 7 to 10. "Christmas Through the Year" features faster, more challenging choreography than ever.

MARTY HEISEY / NEW ERA PHOTOS

MAKING A SPLASH

Brethren Village's synchronized 'Mermaids' prepare for their most challenging show

By MARY BETH SCHWEIGERT
New Era Staff Writer

ARLENE STAUFFER LOVED performing in high-school plays. More than 60 years later, she's still making a splash.

Stauffer, 80, now performs in the pool, with the Silver and Grey Mermaids synchronized swimming and movement teams at Brethren Village retirement community, 3001 Lititz Pike.

The 12 Mermaids are getting in the swim — and the spirit — for their annual holiday show, Jan. 7 to 10.

In "Christmas through the Year," they will perform mu-

sical numbers both whimsical and solemn, wearing elaborate (water-friendly) costumes and even carrying lit candles.

The show, which is free and open to the public, is the most challenging in the Mermaids' 20-year history.

"We're working on a backwards somersault," says Stauffer, 80. "We're trying very hard to ... do that."

The Mermaids' ages range from 73 to 96. Their roster includes a retired beautician, a former teacher and a mother of seven.

One Mermaid is married 67 years. Another started swimming after the death of her husband.



They live with diabetes, asthma and glaucoma. They've had surgeries on their hearts, hips, knees, eyes and backs.

Some can't even swim.

But all of that evaporates once they hit the water.

The Mermaids' dedication often inspires their audience — and their director, Brethren Village aquatics supervisor Bonnie Leibold.

"(People have) a different concept of what the senior years look like," she says.

"It didn't look like this."

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Splash

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The 12 Grey Mermaids perform synchronized movement, with their feet never leaving the pool floor.

Four Silver Mermaids do actual synchronized swimming, floating on their backs and getting their hair wet.

The Mermaids practice once a week, year-round, for their holiday show. They also perform "road shows" at area retirement communities.

In 1995, the Mermaids appeared on "Good Morning America," a career highlight.

Leibold, the Mermaids' director since 2003, worked in theater for two decades. Before coaching synchronized swimming, she performed on a team herself.

Water exercise improves muscle strength, balance and range of motion, while providing an important social outlet, Leibold says. Mastering the routines even helps boost memory.

"It's a complete wellness picture that happens in here," she says.

Leibold strives for perfection. Sometimes, she admits, she can be tough.

But the Mermaids have risen to the challenge — and are quick to praise their coach's dedication and patience.

"I don't think she expects more than we can give," says Rhoda Gamble, a 10-year Grey Mermaid.

Many Mermaids take notes on the routines and practice their moves on land.

"They're very dedicated," says Katie Wilson, who assists Leibold, along with Marie King-Linares and Kelly Wilson.

"They take it very seriously. They want it to be perfect."

'CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE YEAR'

WHAT: Grey and Silver Mermaids' holiday show

WHERE: Pool at Brethren Village retirement community, 3001 Lititz Pike, Lancaster

WHEN: 2 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 7; 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 8; 7 p.m. Friday, Jan. 9; 6 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 10

ADMISSION: The show is free, but reservations are required by calling 581-4295. If you reach an answering machine, leave a message stating the number of people in your party and the show you wish to attend.

At 96, Annemarie Strickler is the "most seasoned" Mermaid.

A native of Germany, she also likes to volunteer, weed the community's gardens and write her autobiography.

Thirteen years ago, Strickler joined the Grey Mermaids. She found a tight-knit group whose bonds built on in-pool teamwork extend to social outings on dry land.

The women lean on each other through hard times, including the recent death of Betty Sheaffer, a Mermaid for nine years.

A 95-year-old "retired" Mermaid will step in for the holiday shows, Leibold says.

Some of the Mermaids have conquered a lifelong inability to swim or even a fear of the water.

"Many of these Mermaids, I taught to swim," Leibold says. "Some had never had their feet

off the (pool) floor."

Gamble, 88, who has had heart and cataract surgeries, still considers herself a nonswimmer. But she says being a Mermaid is great exercise — and a lot of fun.

"I enjoy being with the girls," she says. "It's a nice group."

Leibold's choreography for "Christmas Through the Year" is faster and more challenging than ever before.

The Silver Mermaids will even make a maiden attempt at diving.

They will perform to "New York, New York," a 10½-minute routine where their feet touch the pool floor only twice.

The full cast will perform "The 12 Days of Christmas," "Calendar Girl" and the grand finale, "Silent Night."

"We have lots of fun," says Darlene Fenninger, 73, blowing a

kiss as "Miss February" during a recent practice.

Staff and residents craft the Mermaids' costumes and head pieces, which range from a bride to Romeo's Juliet. The Mermaids change costumes for each number.

They perform their signature, "Silent Night," while holding lit candles. The Mermaids have done the same routine, with only minor modifications, for the past 19 years.

"They are very protective of this number," Leibold says. "They want it to be very solemn, very stately."

Susanne Wiest, 87, will debut as a Grey Mermaid during the holiday shows. She warns the audience not to expect physical perfection.

"We're no beauties," she laughs.

"Our shapes are very plump, most of us."

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