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A Healthy Intensity *ELEANOR O'SULLIVAN/STAFF WRITER*

Three and a half years ago, Fred Fornicola had a moment of truth, with the help of his wife, Lori.

"I wasn't satisfied with my career path at that point. I'd been involved in the industry (of fitness) for years — I started strength training at 15 or 16 — so my wife said, when I was trying to think of the kind of business I'd like to open — "Hello! Do what you love; go for it! "

Fornicola, 45, did go for it: three years ago, he opened Premiere Personal Fitness, a center for strength training and fitness.

On a recent morning, Fornicola sat at his desk near a window overlooking Lake Avenue, with a view of Ocean Grove.

On his desk was a copy of "Dumbbell Training For Strength and Fitness," co-written by Fornicola and Matt Brzycki, coordinator of Recreational Fitness and Wellness programs at Princeton University. Published in June, the book incorporates the authors' philosophy of training intensely for short periods, with safety an imperative.

Among the book's virtues are clearly worded descriptions of dumbbell exercises, photos of each exercise in progress, and do's and don'ts — critical in avoiding injury.

"I learned of Fred through my wife, who works with Fred's wife. She came home and said he was opening a fitness center. I first met him at a seminar on nutrition at Dean's (Natural Food Market) on Route 35," said Fornicola's client Bob Vale of Ocean Township.

"My goal in working with Fred? Primarily, it's good health and to live my life and not be sore! I go twice a week, at a minimum, and train from 30 minutes to an hour. Fred's an advocate of high intensity training," said Vale, a cyclist.

From safe, intense strength training comes self esteem, determination and increased capacity, Fornicola said. That formula is being discovered by students from the Ocean Township High School's girls' field hockey team. Donna DeNoble, the school's head field hockey coach, suggested the players work with Fornicola to build strength for competition.

"The students are highly motivated. When they come here on Saturday, they've already put in a week of school and games and practice. They tell me that now, when they get tired, they know they can push themselves further," Fornicola said.

"Fred's focused and intense training sessions have helped me to make remarkable gains in my strength and overall fitness. Because of my positive experience training with Fred, I felt that he was the right person to train my players," DeNoble said.

Fornicola is a Neptune native who lives with his family in Ocean Township. He's a graduate of Mount Carmel School, Asbury Park (alumnus Danny DeVito was an altar boy at Fornicola's

parents' wedding), St. Rose High School in Belmar and (the former) Stockton State College, Galloway. He is a certified personal trainer.

The fitness center is in the former Newberry building, where shoppers once could buy houseplants, clothing, mothballs and lunch under one roof. At its Lake Avenue entrance — the 56,000-square-foot building's official address is 614 Cookman Ave. — you climb 45 steps to Fornicola's center. Along the way, you pass a fitness equipment business.

"I chose Asbury Park because the building was a great opportunity for a business. The place was empty. As for those 45 steps, I tell people that you benefit much more from doing it the hard way!" Fornicola said.

"I'm one of the advocates of Asbury Park," Vale said. "I think it has turned the corner. On a Saturday, you can't get a parking spot on Cookman Avenue."

Vale also said that he chose Fornicola because of his insistence on safety first.

"In the years I've been working with Fred, I've never been injured, as so many of my peers have. They go off to gyms and they hurt a knee, shoulder, back, or it aches, or they wind up with chronic injury," Vale said.

Studies of American children's health show an alarming increase in overweight, obesity and childhood diabetes. Fornicola, who has a daughter, Alexa, who will be 12 this month, said that children and their parents must acknowledge the need for fitness through exercise and nutrition.

"It's the parents who go to the drive-through, and the parents who do the food shopping. They have to set the example for their kids," he said.

What he sees working with high school students and young adults is their ability to gain strength readily. The Ocean Township hockey players work out twice a week for about 25 minutes per session, he said.

Douglas Scott, physical education teacher and strength and condition coach at The Pingry School in Bridgewater met Fornicola about 2 1/2 years ago through their profession.

"What sets him (Fred) apart would probably be his attention to detail. It's really hard as a fitness professional to get your point across without sounding infomercial-ly — you know, "Lose 12 pounds in a week!" Scott said.

"You have to educate a person in how the body responds to exercise, how strength happens, how to reach your goals. I've been down to Fred's center and I've seen the attention he gives to his clients," Scott said.

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