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Walking With Seniors in the Proctor Gym

By Larry Chase, for the *Monitor*

From the February 18 Concord Monitor

By the numbers: During winter weekdays, about four or five of us are already walking at 7:30 AM, even though the fieldhouse doors don't officially open until 8. By 9, when participation peaks, there may be close to 20. By 10, when the doors close, there's rarely more than a pair of stragglers.

The numbers add up: In 2012, 77 different individuals covered a recorded distance of 4,832 miles. At 14 laps to the mile, this translates into 67,648 person-circuits around the interior perimeter of Proctor Academy's Farrell Field House in Andover.

Distance record holder in 2012: Charlotte Clark, who chalked up 467 miles, and who celebrated her 89th birthday on January 23.

Welcome to the Walking for Seniors program of the Kearsarge Council on Aging, in operation since the mid-1990s. Open year-round Mondays through Fridays, it's a godsend for those of us who have lost our sense of balance, or who are worried about slipping and falling, or who lack a home-based buddy system, or who come to socialize as much as to exercise.

We are loners and couples, sociable and grim. There are those who sit a spell now and then, and those who keep on truckin'. We always walk in a counter-clockwise direction. Frequency of personal appearances ranges from occasional to compulsive.

We are a motley crew. There's not much Lycra here, no body-hugging Spandex or color coordination. Hooded sweatshirts or plaid flannel shirts, jeans or sweatpants, the occasional bib overalls are the order of the day – for both sexes. Ages range from the high 80s down to the 55-year-old minimum (and occasionally below, as when a junior citizen shows up wanting to get back into shape after an injury or surgery).

Some of us carry poker chips, transferring them from one pocket to another as each lap is completed.

Some of us work up a sweat. Really. We have different roles to play, some of us. There's George, our informal doorman (and former town postmaster), who hangs out near the entrance and greets each arrival by name, learning and remembering the name of each new face. There's Grace, our house mother (and retired radiologist), who maintains law and order: assuring proper footwear is worn, distances are recorded on the tally sheet,

release forms are signed. There's Shirley, the town treasurer, who sets a pace for the rest of us to follow. There's me, the (still) compulsively competitive ex-marathoner, who tries to keep up (though no one but me seems to notice).

We have different approaches to the task at hand. Some walk fast ("to get it over with"), in pairs and in step. Some take their time, by choice or necessity. Some are in continual, deep conversation (occasionally with themselves). Some concentrate on their cellphones, iPods, or Blackberries (or whatever those things are called).

We do Yankee shtick:
 Walker: "Mornin', Ernest. How you today?"

Ernest: "No worse."
 Walker: "Hey, old-timer. Lived here all your life?"

Old-timer: "Not yet."
 Walker: "Say, Mort? What's the best way to get to Lempster?"

Mort: "Guess if I wanted to get to Lempster, I sure as hell wouldn't start from here!"

Some use a cane, and one uses two. One uses a white cane.

The faster among us pick up bits of conversation as we pass slower pairs:
 "... We'll be in Florida in a few days, thank God. ..."

"... pain just won't quit. ..."
 "... as beautiful a girl as I ever met. ..."

"... be goddamned if I can remember. ..."

"... Christly cold up on Flaghole last night. ..."

And as we sit and change back into our Bean boots after the walk:

"Don't get no easier, do it?"
 "Havin' fun yet, old man?"

"Hard to believe I once run a mile in under five minutes."

And this exchange between two old-timers at the tally sheet:

"Gawd! You really do 40 laps a day?"
 "Well, sometimes I round up."

In April or May, the numbers begin to diminish as some of us return for our exercise to the town's back roads, hiking trails, or the Northern Rail Trail. But the hard-core remain – 10 or so – continuing to walk. Counter-clockwise. Fourteen laps to the mile. Every weekday morning, in the Farrell Field House at Proctor Academy, in Andover. Year-round.

Larry Chase of Andover is a recovering corporate American.

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