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Academy of Geriatric Physical Therapy

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Patrice Hazan, PT, DPT, MA, is founder and CEO of GroupHab,

an innovative PT clinic pioneering an alternative model of PT care including PT designed and supervised group exercise classes, an alternative model of PT care with long-term solutions to keep patients well. She has a Doctorate in Physical Therapy from Des Moines University and a Master's degree in Gerontology from Roosevelt University. In addition, she is a GCS, a member of the Academy of Geriatrics, a member of

PPS, and a member of ACSM. She has presented this model at CSM, SCAPTA, and PPS annual conventions. Patrice has been published in numerous publications, including the American Physical Therapy Association's *PT in Motion* for her ground-breaking work.

How I Built A Geriatric Physical Therapy and Wellness Center: The HouseFit Story

Beth Templin, PT, DPT

I was never, I mean *never ever* going to start my own practice. I had no dreams of being a business owner. In fact, I felt the exact opposite. I loved the idea of working for a large company with great benefits and lots of job security. I thought people in my graduating class who were excited about the possibility of owning their own clinic were a little crazy. I had no interest in it whatsoever.

What I did know was I wanted to work with older adults. I was part of that small percent of physical therapy students that knew they wanted to work in geriatrics. After graduation, I spent the first two years of my career in the hospital setting before transitioning to home health. Being able to treat older adults in the comfort and convenience of their own home was my dream job. It was the perfect combination of being both a challenging and rewarding environment. I loved it so much, I worked for the same company for 11+ years.

The longer I stayed in the home health setting, the more I began to notice that there was a gap. I was discharging patients who no longer qualified for home health because they were not homebound. They were not always transitioning successfully to outpatient therapy even though I knew they would benefit from additional services. They

would go for a few visits and then stop. I found there were several reasons for this, ranging from poor motivation and unreliable transportation to not liking the typical outpatient clinic experience. I began to wonder if there was a way to fill that gap: a way to catch those that were falling through the cracks; a way to help keep these people from having a decline after they were discharged from home health services only to end up right back on service a few months later? Was this even a thing? Could I continue to see patients at home under Medicare Part B?

That is when I started looking into building a mobile physical therapy practice. I thought it would be the perfect way to keep seeing the geriatric population that I loved to treat, but not be tied down by homebound status. Plus, I really believe that the home is one of the best places to treat our geriatric patients. After months of planning and preparation, I opened a mobile practice in April 2017. I focused on my strengths, working with older adults and people with Parkinson's disease, focusing on independence, balance training and fall prevention. I loved it!!

An amazing benefit of starting my own practice was it allowed me the time to get out and become more involved in the community. I became a certified Rock Steady Boxing Coach and I also

started teaching group exercise classes for the local American Parkinson Disease Association. At first, I was nervous about teaching group classes; it is not something I thought of as a traditional PT role. I found that not only did I love the challenge of teaching group classes, I did it well. I received such positive feedback about my classes; they grew quickly. People kept asking if I had DVDs or a YouTube Channel so they could exercise with me more often.

What I found out was that clients really loved that I was driving intensity, that they actually felt like they got a work out, that they were sweating, that they were short of breath. They told me their balance was getting better, they had more energy. I realized there was a need for more aggressive and intense group exercise classes. I was beginning to see the role of a physical therapist for health and wellness. I started thinking about getting my own gym space. It could be a dedicated place for older adults to exercise with other people that look and move just like them, that have stiff joints, that were worried about losing their balance, that had blood pressure issues, that got short of breath easily.

The New York Times published an article in January 2018 about a really unique fall program developed in the Netherlands.¹ Several people sent

it to me saying “you need space so you can do this.” When I read the article, I got really excited about the prospect of recreating a similar program. I searched to see if there was anything like it in the United States; I could not find anything. That was my personal call-to-action. I knew that there was a huge need to bring programming like this to my area. I felt I had the skills needed to build a comprehensive, therapy-driven, and evidence-based fall prevention program that stepped outside the standard therapy mindset. I had already considered getting a physical location to hold more classes. I wanted space to be able to offer advanced balance training and fall prevention programming. I had a mission.

I kept researching other models to see what was already out there and found articles about the ActiveStep Treadmill². This piece of equipment allows for perturbation training at high intensity in a safe and controlled environment. Participants are secured in a harness over a treadmill. The treadmill belt reproduces “slips” and “trips” by quickly changing directions. I decided that this equipment was the final piece I needed to be 100% committed to move forward with securing a space.

I knew I could do so much to help serve my community by not offering just physical therapy, but by creating high quality group exercise classes geared specifically toward seniors and also being able to provide falling boot-camps, educational workshops, and advanced perturbation training. In my mind, my future practice was taking shape. I looked at several different spaces throughout the Saint Louis area over a period of several months before making my decision. I chose a 5000 square foot location in a strip mall very close to my home. I knew from coaching at Rock Steady Boxing that I wanted more than 3000 square feet so that I could conduct both therapy sessions and group exercise classes simultaneously. The location also had to have several other “must haves” on my list including handicapped accessible bathrooms, abundant and flat parking, and easy access for anyone with a wheelchair or a walker. Even though this space was originally a little larger than I had planned for, it had everything I wanted. Plus, the floorplan was wide open, which meant I would have very few modifications or buildout. It was perfect!

The next steps to move forward included creating a business plan, securing a bank loan, finalizing the lease, working with a contractor on the buildout, hiring and training staff, and developing a marketing plan. It was a busy and hectic few months. We maintained the mobile practice and successfully opened the gym space for business on October 1st. Since opening, we have been able to refine our marketing message. We are primarily focusing on education-based marketing. This means we are speaking directly to our patients and educating them on how physical therapy may be the solution to their problem. We do this through regular articles in the local newspaper, a monthly newsletter, offering free workshops at our location, and through our presence on FaceBook. Once they express interest, we move forward with obtaining physician orders to begin treatment.

This whole process has been a huge learning curve for me. I have made some mistakes along the way, but I have done more right than wrong. I have been able to build my dream practice and build an amazing team to help me serve the aging community in a new and exciting way. The response from the community has been amazing. Everybody loves our space. They like exercising next to people dealing with similar issues. We play music from the 60s the majority of the day and our clients sing and dance along during their therapy sessions. It is a very happy place, which makes for a better overall experience for our clients.

There are so many benefits and rewards to being a business owner. There are also many challenges, especially when you are new and trying to grow. Once I knew I was going to expand my practice from a one-person mobile practice to having a physical location with staff, one of the best things I did was commit to joining a coaching group. They give me an immense amount of support and guidance.

By the time we have become a licensed therapist, many of us have 7 years of school or more under our belts just to become an entry-level therapist. Then all of the additional years of practice and education we go through to really master our practice. Unless you were a business major or minor for your undergraduate degree, there is so much to learn about running a business. You need to invest time and energy to learn how to become

a good business owner to be successful.

As our population continues to age, there are not enough physical therapists available to continue treating our geriatric patients one-on-one. We need to think of better ways to serve aging adults. One way of accomplishing this is to offer group classes specifically designed to meet their needs. The benefits of the group setting go way beyond the physical for these individuals. The social, emotional, and mental well-being of older adults also improves with this kind of model. Another important shift we need to make as professionals is to emphasize wellness and prevention. Consider offering an annual check-up or other type of screening for those of Medicare age so you can identify small issues before they become a big problem. Educate seniors to be proactive about managing their physical health and fitness by providing educational workshops. Keep them on the “exercise wagon” after they discharge from rehabilitation physical therapy services by offering group classes to prevent decline that sends them back on your caseload a few months later.

I think this is an exciting time to be working with our older adults. The potential to make a big and lasting impact is huge. That is what motivates me. I cannot wait to see how my practice continues to grow and serve my aging community. I invite your questions. Please send correspondence to beth@housefitstl.com

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