

TAKE A HIKE: Redefining senior moments

By Amy Schellenbaum Staff Writer
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It could be argued that once you're over the hill, you pick up speed. Physicists understand that. Skiers understand that. And members of a local group of spry seniors definitely understand that.

That phrase is the motto of the Over the Hill Gang of Los Angeles, a group of singles and couples age 50 and older devoted to maintaining an active lifestyle despite persistent encouragements to slow down.

"It's really a lot of fun to be with people your own age who are still out doing things," said 70-year-old Calabasas resident Bruce Benson. "And I'm not talking about taking a walk in the park."

Like rebellious teenagers, their actions seem to be saying to other generations, "Oh yeah? Just watch me."

Members of the approximately 150-person group kayak in Catalina, hike through the San Gabriel Mountains and the Sierras, ride horses in Death Valley and frequent Mammoth Mountain for midweek black diamond runs. The group has traveled as far as Australia and Africa. They've skied in

France. In October, members are planning to travel to Cape Cod, Mass., to ride bikes.

This is not your grandma's knitting circle.

"Most people our own age roll their eyes and admonish us to be careful," Benson said. But members of the Over the Hill Gang scoff at other's ideas of their supposed physical limitations. They confront such common conceptions with subtle, personal defiance.

"We always face limits in life, some imposed on us by others and some we impose on ourselves. I think a natural curiosity helps some of us push back on these limits more than others,"



Benson said.

The group emerged as a chapter of the international Over the Hill Gang, which was formed in Colorado in 1977 and blossomed into a worldwide ski club for seniors. The Los Angeles chapter formed in 1988 and has since become an independent entity.

"Joining an active senior group ... is a way to channel your energies once you're retired," said Ken Ando, 72,

of Torrance. "A lot of professional people, once they retire, just atrophy because they have no activities to lock into. If it weren't for the club, I wouldn't have experienced all the pleasures of retirement, particularly the time to go skiing."

For its members, the Over the Hill Gang is not only a way to participate in the physical activities they enjoy, but also to develop friendships with people in similar life stages and with related interests.

"Everyone has a common interest of being outdoors and enjoying sports," said 73-year-old Rolling Hills Estates resident Helen DeBerard, who has been a member since the group's first year. DeBerard and her 81-year-old husband,

Charles, also are ski instructors for people with disabilities.

Many members, such as the DeBerards, were very active before joining the group, but others rarely did such physical activities during their younger adult lives.

"The Over the Hill Gang changed my life. I hadn't ridden a bike since I was a kid," said group president Doris "DB" Lion, of Valley Village. "I didn't do any of this earlier. So as an adult to do this, it's been fabulous."

Lion joined the group shortly after it was founded in Los Angeles and has since participated in every type of activity. With the Over the Hill Gang, she has kayaked, biked, hiked, skied and traveled to other continents.

Dues are \$35 per year and according to Lion, the cost for the outings is low. Prospective members are invited to attend a couple of events to see if they're interested in joining.



Members of the Over the Hill Gang, a group of active seniors, gather on a recent Saturday morning for a 3 mile roundtrip walk from the Point Vicente Interpretive Center to the Terranea resort. (Scott Varley/Staff Photographer)

Along with the athletic gatherings, members of the Over the Hill Gang take monthly excursions to ethnic restaurants, where they learn about international cuisine from an activity leader.

They throw parties and picnics and each gathering concludes with a meal. "It's a very fun social group and we've formed lifetime friends," DeBerard said. Members report that as they become involved in the group, they quickly develop an awareness of their physical and mental abilities.

Lion skis with her grandchildren and Ando spoke of a man who was so into the physical activities that after an accident that resulted in four to five metal pins being inserted in his hip, he proudly showed off pictures of the medical procedure at the next social gathering.

"I can tell you it's easy to buy into the perils of aging," Benson said. "Gee, if everybody's getting sick, maybe I shouldn't be feeling so good."

By surrounding themselves with people who are determined to stay active, however, they are able to motivate each other.

"We had the attitude that if they could do it, then we can do it when we're 80," DeBerard said. "That attitude is contagious."

So contagious that seven group members who live out of state still join in the activities. They come from as far as Florida to participate with the gang of active seniors.

"I want to see what's over the next hill," Benson said. "I've got the legs to climb it, and it's fun to take the hike with others who feel the same way."

To find out more about the group of active local seniors, go to

www.overthehillganglosangeles.org or email membership@overthehillganglosangeles.org