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Learning new tricks - An adult gymnastics class at a York County YMCA truly is fun for all ages.

By Alison Johnson | Special to the Daily Press *October 18, 2008*

When Thanh Smith started taking gymnastics, she could barely do a handstand and couldn't do a cartwheel at all.

But Smith figured it wasn't too late to learn — even though she is 67 years old. When she heard about an adult gymnastics class at the Victory Family YMCA in York County, she jumped right in.

"The first day, it was a disaster," said the Yorktown woman, who teaches yoga and Tai Chi at [Christopher Newport University](#). "I had the flexibility, but this was much more about speed and momentum. I fell all over, but then I got more confidence. I've had to get my brain moving at a faster speed."

While most gymnastics classes are packed with little kids, the weekly adult class at the York County YMCA — one of a growing number of programs nationwide — draws a different crowd.

In addition to Smith, participants include 61-year-old Sam Parrucci of Newport News, a former college gymnast who never learned the flips of floor routines, and 34-year-old Kathy Childs of Yorktown, a mother of three who regrets not taking gymnastics as a girl.

"I just never had the opportunity," Childs said. "I guess I'm living out a childhood dream."

The current eight-week session is the third time the YMCA has offered the program, and it has proved to be a popular addition, said Liz Wendler, the class instructor.

"It's kind of like stepping back in time and being a kid again," said Wendler, a former international and collegiate gymnast. "When we're in class, we see a lot of people peeking in the door out of curiosity. The message is that we can all still learn new tricks, no matter what age we are. We have a lot of fun."

Gymnastics offers a full-body workout with physical benefits for people of all ages, said Karen Harper, youth sports coordinator at the YMCA. The stretching and conditioning involved improves fitness level, muscular tone, body awareness, circulation and flexibility, Harper said.

"It all improves joint health and cuts down on the risk of joint injuries," she said.

Still, Wendler has to be careful with her older class members to keep them safe. Classes start with plenty of stretching, with everybody working in comfortable clothes and no shoes on a blue mat.

After a round of handstands during a recent class, Wendler coaxed everyone to shake out their wrists.

"Give your hands a break before you get back up," she said.

Nobody does moves that feel too uncomfortable, and participants work very gradually to build up

The Peninsula Metropolitan YMCA is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. We have been building strong kids, strong families and strong communities on the Peninsula and in surrounding communities since 1896. Our mission is "To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all." The YMCA is open to everyone regardless of age, race, gender, national origin or religion; and makes scholarships available so everyone who wants to participate may do so.

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skills. To learn front and back rolls and handsprings, for example, they practice slow-motion flips using a barrel-shaped, padded mat that supports their bodies.

When people mess up — like when Parrucci tumbled to the floor on a back roll attempt — the laughter is good-hearted.

"All of this is new to me, so it's fun," said Parrucci, who competed on the rings and parallel bars in college. "It's something completely different from running or lifting weights, or any of the usual things people do to stay in shape."

Childs has gotten strong at cartwheels and is working on running front handsprings. Her two older children, ages 5 and 3, are in gymnastics classes as well. "I like that we're all involved in it," she said. "For me, it's helped with my flexibility, which is my weakest area. It forces me to stretch and be disciplined with how I move around."

As for Smith, she now can pull off good handstands and decent cartwheels; even if her legs are still a little bent as her body turns.

"It's like mentally you figure out, 'I can do this,' " she said, "and that's a really good feeling."

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