

Berkeley YMCA recognizes godfather of fitness Jack LaLanne

By Kristin Bender

BERKELEY -- The godfather of fitness, Jack LaLanne, took a break from his daily ritual of lifting weights for two hours to talk to people in Berkeley about how it is that he can lift weights for two hours at the age of 94.

LaLanne, the man who opened the first modern health club more than 70 years ago and then spent 30 years on television prodding men and women to exercise, eat right and take responsibility for their own bodies, was back in Berkeley on Thursday night receiving an award from the Berkeley-Albany YMCA, the place where he got started nearly 80 years ago.

"I've got one thing on my mind," said LaLanne, who lives in Morro Bay. "To help people help themselves."

LaLanne, who sticks to a diet of fish, whole grains, vegetables, and doesn't eat flour or sugar, said exercise and nutrition go hand-in-hand.

"Exercise is king and nutrition is queen. Together you have a kingdom," he said.

LaLanne didn't arm wrestle the mayor or swim through the Berkeley Marina pulling a boat with his teeth, but he did impress the 200 or so folks who showed up at the Berkeley City Club to check out the 150-pound muscleman.

"I used to watch him and his wife in the 1960s on television and I never forgot that," said Ana Bertero, a 47-year-old Contra Costa County firefighter who works out regularly. "Seeing him reaffirmed the importance of physical fitness at all ages. He's still an inspiration."

LaLanne was there with his wife, Elaine, whom he met 55 years ago while she was working at KGO-TV in San Francisco as a television host.

At 27, she said she was smoking cigarettes and eating bear claws for breakfast. LaLanne began to flirt with her, extolling the virtues of healthy eating and exercise. She began exercising at a class that he taught and the two were soon an item, dining and dancing in San Francisco.

They married in 1958. They have three children but no grandchildren.

Together, the two have written 15 books about fitness. They also lecture all over the world, promoting their books and



inspiring people to live healthier. "But nowadays, every hotel has a gym," he said. "I never miss a workout."

LaLanne, who is known worldwide for his success as a bodybuilder, author and marketer of vitamins, looks more like he's in his 70s than his 90s. He's also remarkably spunky and positive. "He's always like that," said his wife. "He never looks to the past. He's always looking forward to the future, always, saying, 'I'm just getting started, I'm just getting started.'"

In addition to his two hours of daily weightlifting, LaLanne said he swims at least 30 minutes daily. He changes his workout every 30 days, sometimes running or doing other cardiovascular exercise. "When I do my running it's up hill or up stairs. Everything I do is vigorous," he said.

LaLanne's ties to the East Bay date back decades. In 1933, he built a body building gym in the backyard of his home on Spalding Street in Berkeley for would-be police and firefighters who were having trouble passing their physical fitness tests.

"In less than two months, everyone passed," he said Thursday night.

At 22 in 1936, he opened a gym called Jack LaLanne's Physical Culture Studio in a building on 15th Street and Broadway in downtown Oakland.

The Berkeley-Albany YMCA recognized the couple with the YMCA Impact Award for their contributions in the "areas of family fitness and health and wellness," said YMCA spokeswoman Cynthia Peterson.

Elijah Jerry "Pumpsie" Green, the first African-American to play for the Boston Red Sox and a retired Berkeley High baseball coach, and Rona Renner, a registered nurse, parent educator and radio talk show host of "Childhood Matters," were also honored.

"We wanted to honor people who have a long history with the YMCA," Peterson said.