

get well soon: a new breed of fitness entrepreneurs want to whip c-town into shape

Lee Chilcote | Thursday, December 15, 2011



TAMMY POLENZ OF VEDAS - PHOTO BOB PERKOSKI

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Some say the human body is a temple. Yet to Tammy Polenz, it's more like a charming but creaky old house that can defy its years with a little bit of TLC.

Polenz is the entrepreneur behind [Vedas Fitness](#), an 8,000-square-foot eco-friendly gym and personal training studio in downtown's IMG building. She launched Vedas a few years ago to create a holistic gym that builds upon her experience in fitness and corporate wellness, which goes back two decades.

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“I see people every day that sit at their desks, do not get enough exercise and don't eat a healthy diet,” she says. “Their bodies are out of balance and they're in pain and discomfort. They don't know how to regain the energy and vitality they've lost.”

Vedas is a successful niche-market gym that combines fitness,



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wellness training and post-rehabilitation therapy in one setting. Polenz helps people take charge of their health and free themselves of pain without medication or surgery. This is just the prescription that Americans need to become healthier and happier, she says.

“Too often, medical interventions offer short-term solutions that only treat symptoms,” she says. “I help people to understand why they’re in pain and change their habits.”

Of course, Polenz is not alone in her prescription for what’s ailing us. As our population ages, more and more individuals, employers, public health officials and health care professionals are turning to wellness programs as a way to achieve good physical, mental and emotional health.

Yet while "wellness" might sound like the latest corporate buzzword, entrepreneurs like Polenz have begun incorporating the concept into a new breed of anti-corporate gyms that cater to health-savvy urban professionals. Boutiques like Vedas, [Fit Studios](#) in Ohio City, and [CrossFit](#) in St. Clair Superior are meeting client needs using holistic approaches.

And the trend is on the rise. In recent years, independent gyms and yoga studios have sprung up in Tremont, Larchmere-Shaker Square and other neighborhoods that are not served by large fitness chains. This on top of the increased popularity of sport and social clubs like [Cleveland Plays](#) and [Hermes](#), two local organizations that manage a growing roster of physically active co-eds.

At the same time, Northeast Ohio’s top public officials have introduced ambitious efforts to improve our region’s health. In launching the County Health Alliance, Cuyahoga County Executive Ed FitzGerald said our county lags behind much of the state and nation in controlling chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Cleveland not only should be home to world-class health institutions, he added, but also healthy communities.

“Obesity in Northeast Ohio is high,” notes Aaron Shaffer, owner



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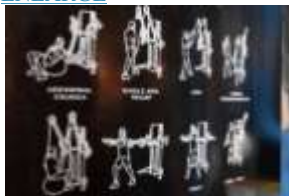
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of CrossFit, which is located in a raw warehouse space on Superior Avenue, just east of downtown. “I’m only one guy, so what can I do? But starting a gym can make a difference.”

Although these entrepreneurs are motivated by a desire to change lives and communities, that desire often began with one's own journey towards better health.

“Like many young women growing up, I went through a dreadful time regarding my weight,” says Polenz. “I endured low self-esteem and starved myself for extended periods, followed by bouts of eating binges that might last days or even weeks.”

She finally broke the cycle of suffering at age 16, when she stumbled upon a fitness program on TV. “These men and women had the most athletic bodies I’d ever seen,” she says. “Not only was the show promoting toned physiques, but it also discussed the importance of overall health and diet. I knew this was what I was trying to achieve.”

When two of Aaron Shaffer’s grandparents died of heart disease, his lifelong passion for fitness was born. “I knew that I didn’t want to go down that road,” he says.

Yet the road to creating a boutique gym is neither obvious nor easy. Polenz spent years working as a personal trainer at other gyms. She also served as the personal trainer for a prominent business owner with chronic back problems, who hired her after realizing that the workouts she designed were the one thing that helped.

Kevin Smyth worked as an instructor in Arizona and Hawaii before returning to Cleveland. After working as a bartender for a few years, he decided to launch Fit, a cozy 800-square-foot gym in Ohio City, because he saw the need for a progressive gym that offered personal training. “I saw that there were 25- to 45-year-old professionals that were looking for a fitness alternative,” he says. “There aren’t any gyms in this area, so I started to dream about creating one.”

Despite the challenges of starting new businesses in the midst of



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an economic recession, these entrepreneurs have been successful. Since launching CrossFit in 2008, Shaffer has focused on incremental growth, accepting only eight new members per month. These limited memberships have sold out each of the past six months. “There’s a sense of community here, and I think people are attracted to that,” he says.



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CrossFit’s classes, which emphasize general physical preparedness in a minimalist setting, attract downtown professionals, students at Cleveland State University, and doctors and nurses from Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals, Shaffer says. “Creating a sense of community is something that downtown Cleveland needs.”



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Now that Smyth is regularly selling out his classes and group sessions at his storefront studio on Bridge Avenue, he's hunting for a larger Ohio City space where he can grow his business. "Larger" for Smyth means adding a few hundred much-needed square feet – still a far cry from the typical 50,000-square-foot Bally Total Fitness.



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“The trend is moving towards small, boutique gyms that offer clients more,” he explains. “Many big gyms get people to sign up and offer them no guidance.”



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Although Polenz was the sole staff when she launched Vedas two years ago, she now employs additional trainers. As a result, she is able to focus on post-rehab clients and helping employers integrate wellness into their health programs. “We teach employees a holistic approach, about making little changes that add up over time,” she says. “Our goal is to encourage people to be more proactive about their health.”



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The payoff down the road -- for the individual, employer and community -- is a big one, she says.

“The younger you teach someone to take care of themselves, the better chance you have of creating lifelong healthy habits. Education, activity and balanced nutrition are first and foremost what are needed to change Clevelanders’ health.”



Photos [Bob Perkoski](#)

- Images 1 - 6: *Vedas*

- Images 7 - 13: *fit*

- Images 14 - 20: *CrossFit CLE*

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