



**From isolation to
inspiration – Jill’s story**

**Moving Communities
case study**

How Jill transformed her life

A few years ago, Jill Hayward's life looked very different. Struggling with severe health issues, anxiety, and limited mobility, even standing up or walking across the room felt impossible.

Today, she teaches fitness classes, leads line dancing sessions, and inspires others to rediscover movement and confidence later in life.

In an interview with Moving Communities, Jill shared her extraordinary journey, one that highlights not only the life-changing power of physical activity, but also the importance of supportive, inclusive environments.





“I was nine stone heavier”

When Jill reflects on where her journey began, she is incredibly honest about the challenges she faced.

At the time, Jill was dealing with multiple physical and mental health conditions, including sleep apnoea, chronic pain, anxiety, and mobility problems.

“I was stopping breathing 64 times an hour, pre-diabetic, very, very anxious and didn’t like leaving the house at all on my own.”

Simple daily activities became overwhelming. “Just moving or standing was agony...really struggling on all fronts.”

Jill explained that much of her health decline came after years spent caring for multiple family members through end-of-life illnesses. “You don’t look after yourself when you’re looking after everybody else.”

The turning point

The moment that changed everything came after a serious medical emergency involving a hernia that left Jill hospitalised and fearing for her life.

Doctors warned her that surgery carried huge risks. "The GP says it will kill me...and the surgeon said, 'Yeah, very likely, but it's the only option we've got.'"

Fortunately, another consultant managed to avoid emergency surgery, giving Jill what she describes as a second chance.

As New Year approached, she made a life-changing decision. "You've dodged a bullet there...perhaps this is something saying to you, you've got some time, try and do something with it."

That was the moment Jill decided to start looking after herself again.

Starting small

Jill's fitness journey didn't begin in a gym. It started with one simple task.

"I had to start by getting up out of the chair and walking across the living room and opening the door for the dog. That was my exercise regime."

As the weight slowly began to come off, Jill realised she needed to introduce movement and exercise into her routine.

Watching transformation stories on television gave her hope that change might actually be possible.

"I thought, well, it must be doable."

But taking those first steps into a leisure centre was terrifying.





“It was terrifying to go as a big person”

With support from her husband and son, Jill visited her local Everyone Active leisure centre in Ashby for the first time.

Even then, fear and self-consciousness nearly stopped her from walking through the doors.

“It was terrifying to go as a big person, as an old person, you worry about people looking at you in the gym.”

Jill admitted she feared being judged or laughed at, but instead, she found kindness, encouragement, and a welcoming community.

“The people at Ashby were just so wonderful, welcoming and supportive.”

She credits much of her success to the staff around her, from receptionists and cleaners to her personal trainer, Ollie.

“He won’t let you hurt yourself so you feel safe, but he stretches you and encourages you. It’s just brilliant.”

Sometimes, even a few supportive words made all the difference.

“The cleaner would say, ‘You’re here again, you’re doing so well,’ and that gave me enough strength to get in the door.”



Rediscovering confidence

Over time, Jill began noticing improvements not only physically, but mentally and emotionally too. She started walking further, building stamina, and eventually progressed from walking to running on a treadmill.

“Somebody said, ‘You should try running.’ I thought they were joking. Now I can do 10 minutes.”

For Jill, the greatest transformation wasn’t about appearance. “It made me feel like a person. Not a blob — a person.”

Giving back through movement

As her confidence grew, Jill decided she wanted to help others experience the same benefits she had found through physical activity.

She began line dancing to improve her stamina and quickly discovered how enjoyable and social movement could be.

Eventually, she organised charity dance events, including an extraordinary four-day line dancing marathon covering the equivalent of 26 miles. The response inspired her to qualify as a line dancing instructor. Today that has gone even further to where Jill runs multiple classes every week across local leisure centres and village halls.



But she didn’t stop there.

Recognising the lack of accessible fitness opportunities for older adults and people with mobility conditions, Jill also trained as a specialist fitness instructor for seniors, stroke rehabilitation, and COPD support.

“Now I run three classes a week for seniors and people with strokes and COPD.”

“I’ve got people standing up out of chairs who couldn’t do it before. Now they’re doing it 10 times in a minute.”



“Having fun isn’t just for young people”

At the heart of Jill’s work is one simple belief, movement should be enjoyable and accessible for everyone.

“Having fun isn’t just for young people.”

Whether it is line dancing, fitness classes, or simply helping someone regain the confidence to move independently again, Jill’s passion is infectious. Her work has even earned wider recognition, with the BBC naming her one of Leicestershire’s top four inspiring women in sport.





Active wellbeing – Tackling invisibility in fitness

One of the most powerful themes throughout Jill’s journey is her belief that older adults are often overlooked in fitness environments and wider society.

During the interview, Jill shared a conversation she’d recently had with a 90-year-old woman who had seen one of her posters and reached out about joining a class. That conversation reinforced something Jill feels strongly about – many older people feel invisible.

“People my age are not just lovely little ladies sitting knitting... they’re funny, intelligent, but we’re invisible.”

She explained that many facilities intentionally market themselves almost exclusively towards younger audiences, making older adults feel as though those spaces are not designed for them.

“We go to all of these gym places and there’s not a picture of anybody like us.”

For Jill, representation matters. Simple changes such as inclusive marketing, visible role models, and beginner-friendly sessions for older adults, could make a huge difference in helping people feel comfortable enough to walk through the doors for the first time.

“Come and try the gym for seniors and we’ll have somebody there to gym buddy you.”

Her message is clear, older adults are not looking to disappear quietly, they want opportunities to move, socialise, improve their health, and enjoy life just like everybody else.

Her journey is proof that physical activity can transform not only health, but confidence, purpose, and community connection at any age.



Sport England
SportPark
3 Oakwood Drive
Loughborough
Leicestershire
LE11 3QF

[sportengland.org](https://www.sportengland.org)

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