

## McGee taking the 'F' out of fitness

By **ARRISSIA OWEN TURNER**

When Dani McGee met Mr. Universe, her world changed. McGee was an avid jogger and cyclist for nearly 20 years, but when she made the move to hire Frank Vassil, a former Mr. Universe and world-class body builder, she discovered muscle groups she never knew existed.

McGee, the new owner of Dani McGee's Mountain Fitness Center, formerly Tina Follett's Fitness Studio, found those muscle groups during a time when she was not only changing her body, she changed her life. Now she wants to help others do the same.

The former accountant up and quit her big wig corporate job in 1998, quit her band Roget's Playground, moved from San Diego to Los Angeles and ended a long-term relationship all at once. She enrolled at Musician's Institute to fulfill a lifelong dream studying bass, and began working out with Vassil four days a week, two hours each session.

With her new body awareness came a different consciousness. McGee cashed in her dot.com stocks, bought a cabin in Big Bear and began consulting with a career counselor to find a new direction for her days.

"I came up to Big Bear to figure out what to do with my life," McGee says. Through the counseling, she deciphered exercise had evolved into more than a hobby for her. It was at the top of her list of priorities. The career counselor also helped her realize that through all of her careers—accounting, music, time at a nonprofit organization—a theme emerged: She likes talking to people and making them feel good about themselves.

Combining the two, McGee opened Dani McGee's Body Image



ARRISSIA OWEN TURNER/Big Bear Grizzly

**Dani McGee wants to help people feel better, from the inside out. As the new owner of Dani McGee's Mountain Fitness Center, you'll know just where to find her.**

Boutique, focusing on body image, hypnotherapy, nutrition and fitness training. "It's a holistic approach to get people to feel better about their bodies," McGee says. "My goal is to get people feeling better on the inside."

Now at her fitness center, McGee can offer her services to a wider array of people. Or people can just sign in and do their own thing. It's up to them.

For those who choose to have her help, she's certified as an advanced personal fitness trainer and fitness nutritionist from the National Endurance Sports Trainers Association. She offers a computerized nutrition program, which tracks a client's physical condition and metabolic rate.

"We come up with an eating plan to get rid of excess stored energy," McGee says. McGee doesn't like the "F" word, as she calls it. Fat should only be used to describe a food's content, not a person, she says. "I focus on how people talk about themselves."

McGee whips out her laptop computer to show results. There are bar graphs and more to chart McGee's clients. One who has worked

with her since June exceeded his one year fitness goal of adding lean mass but in only three months. His waist went down 4.5 inches, and his chest increased three.

Another client working with McGee for the same amount of time wanted to lose weight. She was at 34 percent body fat, now she's down to 28 percent. Both have succeeded on the programs designed for them by McGee based on the system developed by NESTA.

Carol Weaver knows the system works first hand. The 59-year-old school administrator from Norwalk woke up in 1990 and couldn't move. She was later diagnosed with a rare, debilitating form of rheumatoid arthritis. Within four years, a neurosurgeon told her without back surgery, she would spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair.

Weaver wanted to fight. Her rheumatologist OK'd her to use a personal trainer to see if she could regain her strength without an operating table. Weaver started working out with McGee during school breaks spent in Big Bear starting in July and her life changed dramatically.

"When I started, I needed

help getting up and down from the floor," Weaver says. "The other day, she had me doing push ups on the ground. I didn't realize how strong I had become. This lady has incredible patience. She believed I could do it, even when I didn't."

Weaver hopes to send a message through her success. "Anyone who feels there's no hope, anyone who's been diagnosed with a potentially crippling illness, she's made me realize how wrong that is," Weaver says. "I used to walk like a 90-year-old. Now I feel like I'm 30. I appreciate her so much."

McGee hadn't planned on taking her fitness business on a larger scale. But sometimes, events change people's paths. During last year's flooding, McGee's home fitness studio got obliterated by the storm. She scrapped plans to start over. Not long after, Follett called to see if McGee might be interested in doing nutrition counseling for her clients at the gym. By April, McGee came on board as a fitness trainer, too.

In September, when Follett began considering her own life changes, she asked McGee why she hadn't opened her own gym yet. McGee had been thinking about it, so the women's timing worked perfectly. McGee took it as a sign from the universe, just this time it hadn't won any contests.

"I felt like the universe brought all the pieces together at the right time," McGee says. "The signs were here that this is what I was supposed to be doing." Clients like Weaver couldn't be happier.

Dani McGee's Mountain Fitness Center is at 42007 Fox Farm Road, Suite 2A, Big Bear Lake. For more information, call (909) 866-7020.

Contact reporter Arrissia Owen Turner at (909) 866-3456, ext. 142 or by e-mail at aoturner@bigbeargrizzly.net.