



# LA Woman Inspires Her Neighbors

“I want to see your feet moving!” says Irene Lira, 60, with a smile. One might think Lira is talking to a group of dancers or her 14 grandkids. Not so. Lira says things like that to a roomful of older adults, most of them a good 10, 20, even 30 years older than she.

Her role as cheerleader to this group of elders is one she wears well. When she was asked to lead an exercise class for seniors at the International Institute in Los Angeles, Irene, a receptionist at the center, didn't hesitate. “I like working with seniors,” she says. “I'm old enough that I can relate to them and they can relate to me.”

The sentiment is just what OASIS envisioned when the U.S. Administration on Aging made a grant to the City of Los Angeles Department of Aging in 2003. The city contracted with OASIS to implement Active Start. The program combines Active Living Every Day, a behavior change program, and Exerstart, an exercise program.

OASIS trains lay leaders like Lira to lead the classes. With the right training, these older adults are the ideal teachers for their peers. Lira leads her class with confidence and she's seen a transformation in many of her new friends.

“Many of the people had all sorts of excuses for why they couldn't do this or that,” she recalls. “Some have had strokes or arthritis or just hadn't moved in awhile. We modify things so they *can* do it. Some do the workout standing, others sitting. I try to be positive and upbeat. I praise them all the time.”

Leading the Spanish-speaking group over oldies, disco and salsa music, Lira keeps the room moving and she enjoys watching the progress. She recalls one woman who had problems with her legs and started the program sitting down,



Irene Lira is a peer leader for OASIS Active Start classes at the International Institute in Los Angeles.

but soon found herself standing. “I was so surprised!” recalls Lira. “Now I have to make her slow down!”

Training for the OASIS leaders was developed by Jessie Jones, PhD, co-director of the Center for Successful Aging at California State University, Fullerton and a leader in the field of gerokinesiology. Jones developed the Senior Fitness Test, the standard in fitness testing for older adults.

“Using lay leaders provides greater access to exercise classes in community settings,” she says. “For the lay people, taking on a leadership role may provide a greater sense of purpose and confidence.” She adds that good candidates for leading other seniors in an exercise program are supportive, compassionate and enthusiastic.

Lira's enthusiasm is fueled by the gusto with which her class members approach their new active lives. “In the beginning, some of the people came in dragging their feet,” she recalls. “Now they march right in!”