

An Age to Be Active

Helping us live longer, healthier lives, Oleg Zaslavsky in the School of Nursing explores the benefits of physical activity. He does this with the support of Seattle philanthropists Eli and Rebecca Almo.



BY STUART ESKENAZI
PHOTOS BY MARK STONE

Residents of University House Wallingford, an assisted-living facility, stay active and healthy at a fitness class.

OLEG ZASLAVSKY arrived at the University of Washington in 2008 with a Fulbright Scholarship in hand and a research track in trauma care in mind. But at a reception welcoming the class of new nursing scholars, a conversation changed his course.

Zaslavsky, who had come to work on a Ph.D., sat with supporters of the School of Nursing and shared his background and intended pursuits. A native of Russia, he had served six years in the Israeli military and worked as a nurse and researcher focusing on trauma patients.

Across the table, Eli and Rebecca Almo, longtime benefactors of the school and chairs of its advisory board, immediately felt a connection to the charming student and shared their own interests—the science of gerontology and processes for healthy aging.

The Almos are founders of Era Living, which operates eight senior living communities in the Seattle area. In 1996, the couple endowed the School of Nursing's Aljoya Professorship in Aging, and they routinely welcome UW nursing students and faculty to Era Living communities to conduct research with curious-minded residents more than happy to participate.

Getting nursing students jazzed about gerontology is difficult at a time when the country is experiencing a decline in health care practitioners specializing in geriatrics. Health care today often focuses on curing the sick instead of supporting people to enjoy their lives to the

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fullest as they age. But the need is growing as Americans are living longer and the population is aging. Nearly 20 percent of the country will be age 65 or older by 2030—up from 13 percent in 2010.

At the reception the Almos found a captive audience in Zaslavsky. They explained how the programming at their senior living communities is built around a philosophy of enhancing the residents' quality of life, and that it is informed by the UW's nascent research on healthy aging. Zaslavsky said he had seen older patients in emergency rooms and noticed that some maintained quality of life in spite of health challenges while others demonstrated less resistance to stress. “What makes one person more resilient and the other more vulnerable?” he wondered.

After dinner, the Almos introduced Zaslavsky to Rheba de Tornay, the retired Dean of Nursing and namesake of the school's de Tornay Center for Healthy Aging. The evening changed Zaslavsky's course. He and de Tornay built a strong student-mentor relationship. The bond between Zaslavsky and the Almos also grew.

“Eli and Rebecca embraced me as part of their family,” Zaslavsky says. “We ended up having more conversations that shaped my research interests. Really, they became my informal mentors.”



Eli and Rebecca Almo support research into healthy aging.



Oleg Zaslavsky studies fitness and frailty.

Earning his Ph.D. in 2012, Zaslavsky returned to Israel to teach at the University of Haifa, but the UW never strayed far from his thoughts. He kept in touch with the Almos and continued to confer with de Tornay until her death in 2013. “It always percolated in my mind that I could best unleash my scientific potential within the research ecosystem at the University of Washington,” he says.

That opportunity came in 2015 after the Almos funded part of a new position at the School of Nursing. Zaslavsky applied and ultimately was appointed assistant professor in the Department of Biobehavioral Nursing and Health Informatics. His research focuses on healthy aging as well as frailty, a common medical condition among older adults that can accelerate a person's transition to long-term nursing care. Symptoms of frailty include weight loss, changes in body function, sedentary behavior and chronic fatigue. They proliferate through declining physical and cognitive activity.

Zaslavsky studies the physiological and behavioral markers of healthy aging with a goal of developing care strategies so that frail adults can maintain their functional independence for as long as possible. His research may also help clinicians predict frailty and identify ways to delay its onset. “Oleg is a star,” Rebecca Almo says.

Zaslavsky is currently conducting a study to explore what motivates older people to become more physically active. Residents are keeping daily “travel diaries” that track their every movement. Zaslavsky says some are surprised at their entries, telling him, “I thought I was more active!”

His research fascinates the Almos, who are constantly adapting services at their communities to better support their residents' health and happiness. The Almos' interests in healthy aging, however, are rooted in more than just business.

Eli Almo says he and Rebecca chose their path in part because of his own parents' history. Lilly Aljoya was 13 and Jack Almo was 19 when they were sent from their home in Salonika, Greece, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. Every member of their two families perished in the Holocaust. After they were liberated, the couple met, found love and support in one another, and rebuilt their lives together. “I never got to meet my grandparents or watch them grow old,” Eli Almo says.

By supporting Zaslavsky's professorship, the Almos have found another way to honor their memory—and make a difference. “It is truly fulfilling to engage with the faculty and students who carry out our passion,” Eli Almo says.

Zaslavsky considers his research in healthy aging a personal mission on behalf of de Tornay. “We had hours upon hours of conversation about her philosophies on aging,” he says. “I feel an obligation to carry out her legacy.”

In October 2016, the UW launched Be Boundless—For Washington, For the World, the largest campaign in its history. Visit uw.edu/boundless to learn more about how, by partnering with the UW, you can help create healthy futures for all.