

## Living in the here and now important to founder of Earth Angels

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Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald  
Attorney Elenora Benz always makes time for herself in her busy schedule.

STILLWATER — 10,000 steps a day “is nothing” for Newton-based attorney, Elenora “Ellie” Benz, as she stresses the importance of staying fit and being healthy while keeping up with a busy work schedule.

With a pink Garmin fitness tracker wrapped around her wrist, Benz, who runs her own law firm, Elenora L. Benz, Attorney at Law, is defying the odds as a full-time businesswoman, humanitarian, and mother to name a few.

“I try to carve out personal time each week to do the things that I want to do and to make sure that I stay healthy,” she said. “If I don’t stay healthy, there is no business, then my clients are let down ... it’s a domino effect. It pays to stay healthy.”

Benz, who stays in shape through diet and exercise, is a self-proclaimed, although not a strict, vegetarian for 25 years and cooks her own meals at home.

“I always try to incorporate fresh, local produce,” she said. “But I do like to go out (to eat) as well. Who doesn’t?”

A former marathon runner, the 72-year-old Benz has put long-distance running aside for long walks every day.

“Working out with weights is very important, so I incorporate that as well. All you can do is hold the aging process at bay, you can’t make it go away, but you can certainly try to coexist with it,” she said.

Throughout her life, Benz, who now resides on a farm in Stillwater, was involved in many sports, including tennis, riding horses, and more recently, training her dogs.

The owner of three dogs, two horses, and a few cats, Benz trains her 2 1/2 year-old Irish water spaniel, Willo, a certified canine good citizen through the American Kennel Club, for competitions throughout different states.

“It’s a great experience and I have met so many great people,” she said. “Willo has qualified and won ribbons too.”

In addition to competitions, Benz has certified Willo as a therapy dog and takes her to the local hospice care center on Fridays to visit with patients.

“She is so gentle and so soft, the patients just love her,” she said.

Benz may be most well-known, however, for her involvement in the Earth Angels project, which began 17 years ago.

“When I first came to the county, I was in the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners and Mary Lou McCutcheon, now the former director of the Division of Senior Services, gave a presentation in 1998 at a meeting and she talked about seniors that are aging in place in Sussex County. If you got in your car and drove down a driveway in Sussex County, you will find someone living alone in a house ... in their 80s and 90s... who were probably born in that house,” Benz said.

McCutcheon went on to explain that there was only so much they could do for the seniors and Benz wanted to help. That is when she started to reach out to the community and collect items the seniors needed throughout the year.

“I spoke to my friends and clients, even placing a piece in the New Jersey Herald, and the response was amazing,” she recalled. “We had given suggestions, and people kept dropping items off at my office.”

In the first year of the program, more than 20 names, many of whom reside in the community, The Homestead nursing home, and Liberty Towers, were given to Benz from the office of Senior Services. The program is now up to a list of 60 senior citizens.

The program, which has included volunteers such as Sheriff Michael Strada and the former sheriff Robert Untig, has exploded with the inclusion of greeting cards.

Margaret Untig, wife of former sheriff Untig and a Sandyston-Walpack School teacher, had made a suggestion that her class could make greeting cards for the seniors throughout the year.

"We now do six individual greeting cards a year from students in the fourth and fifth grades in Sandyston-Walpack, third graders from Frankford School, and, new this year, is third graders from Green Township School," Benz said.

Initially, seniors would be thrilled to receive the letters and would place them on their walls of their rooms, but Benz has been noticing the seniors are now writing back to the students. At the end of the school year, the seniors are given a pizza party thrown by the students.

"We are not a charity or entity," she explained. "It is a project and my personal outreach to the community. The seniors are so sweet and we love to just sit and visit with them."

A legal secretary for 25 years, 19 of which were spent working beside her mother, Benz decided she could bring something to the profession that she had not yet seen and decided she would attend New York Law School, where she graduated in 1993.

"My mother was my role model; never a bad word came from her mouth," she said. "She taught me so much, even my sense of style."

Benz's father struggled with health problems, receiving a triple bypass in the 1980s, and passed away before her mother died at the age of 94.

In addition to the work she does in her legal profession, Benz has held many professional positions throughout the years, all volunteer-based.

"I spent four years on the District Ethics Committee for the Supreme Court, serving my last year as the chair, which investigates grievances against attorneys," Benz said. "When I left that group, I joined the Supreme Court Committee of Character where we had to review and scrutinize every application for admission to practice as a lawyer, getting up to 75 applications which are 19 pages long in July alone. Everything we do we recommend to the Supreme Court."

Benz is the mother to one son, Nick, 53, and grandparent to three grandchildren, Nicholas, 22, a junior at William Paterson; Brittany, 20, a student in the special education department at Mount Olive High School; and Brandy, 18, who is studying criminal justice at the County College of Morris. Brandy is also a summer intern with Benz in her law office.

Benz is also the past chair of the Sussex County Chamber of Commerce, past president of the Branchville Rotary Club, a member of the Newton Memorial Hospital Bio-Ethics Committee, and has been honored by the Sussex County Chamber of Commerce, Soroptimists International and the New Jersey Women Business Owners.

In her extra time, Benz likes to travel with her partner, Richard, and she happily proclaims the two of them "make a great team," and has been singing in the Water Gap Singers, a community chorus that performs classical choral music, for 15 years.

With all her professional obligations and activities, it's a wonder Benz has any time for herself, but she makes sure to clear some room in her schedule to allow it.

"If you don't get enough sleep, all bad things can happen," Benz says with a laugh. "What do you want your clients to see? Would you put your confidence in someone who doesn't look good? Health is a state of mind," she said.

"It's funny, because in my head I am still 18," she said. "How many years do I have left? 20 or 30? I am not doing a countdown. Today is the day that counts, so make it count," she said.

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