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## Canyon Ranch founder practices what he preaches

Canyon Ranch founder Mel Zuckerman changed his life and started an industry all in the search for balance in his life and better health.



Founders of Canyon Ranch Jerry Cohen and Mel Zuckerman at the gym of their Miami Beach property.  
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Mel Zuckerman and I are seated on the deck of Canyon Ranch Miami Beach while an ocean breeze tussles our hair and a turquoise ocean taunts us. Zuckerman's glowing skin and trim upper body make him look much younger than 83. It's obvious he has embraced the lifestyle he envisioned when he transformed the fitness and spa industry with his posh Canyon Ranch retreats.

I ask Zuckerman about the wellness revolution, figuring he would be thrilled about his role in kick-starting it a few decades ago. His answer surprises me.

"There's still a disconnect between what we *know* we should do and putting it into action," he says.

True, I admit to him. Most of us know we should be exercising and focusing on prevention, but we claim we're too busy. Then, we plunk ourselves in front of our television sets and snack on junk food while we boost the ratings of reality TV. Many Americans resolve each January to eat healthier, exercise more or get regular check-ups in the new year. Nearly 60 percent of people drop their resolutions by the six-month mark, according to studies by University of Scranton psychology professor John Norcross.

How, then, do you convince a workaholic that work/life balance is critical or an overworked mother that embracing wellness is a necessity, not a luxury? I ask Zuckerman. His frame of reference is own personal transformation, which he documents in his new book, *The Restless Visionary*. When Zuckerman opened the now famous Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz., in 1979, he was an overweight homebuilder and recovering workaholic whose health and marriage had taken a beating. "I had high blood pressure, ulcers, diverticulitis, and a hernia. I lived a sedentary life, and I was 50 pounds overweight," he tells me.

"There has to be readiness for a life change. Usually it's fear," he says. In Zuckerman's case, his fear resulted from the death of his father.

Zuckerman explains that he was in the doctor's office when his dad was diagnosed with lung cancer. "I watched his face turn gray, his hand begin to tremble. He was 75. He reached in his pocket and took out the pack of Camels. He crumpled it up and said, 'Never again.' He never did smoke after that, but I buried him six months later. He got his 'aha' moment too late."

But Zuckerman didn't. He says his "aha" moment came when he went to a California fat farm after his dad's death, connected with a fitness instructor and felt the high that comes from exercise. He lost 13 pounds in 10 days. The experience of being in control of his health made him want to build his own resort to deal with weight and pampering and fitness – it would be about mind, body and spirit.

Working together with his wife, Enid, it took a few years for the first Canyon Ranch in Tucson to take off. "We really were treading in new territory." After that, Zuckerman expanded the wellness resort concept. With their business partner, Jerry Cohen, the Zuckermans opened Canyon ranch in Lenox, Mass., in 1989 and Canyon Ranch Living Miami Beach in 2008. They also expanded the brand to incorporate healthy living into vacations with a Canyon Ranch SpaClub in Las Vegas and another onboard Cunard's Queen Mary 2. All along, Zuckerman has had to battle slipping back into his former life as a workaholic. "I have to remember I built Canyon Ranch to get away from the stress." It's been a particular challenge during the recession, when Canyon Ranch recorded an unprecedented drop in occupancy, struggled with cash flow, and quashed plans for seven new projects.

Throughout these recent trying years, Zuckerman has stuck to his exercise routine, working out on the elliptical or cardio circuit four times a week. "Of all the life-changing events in my life, creating the habit of regular exercise is the one that has been the most important to me in allowing me to enjoy a high quality of life into my 80s," he says. Cohen, the financial/operations man, says he, too, has bought into the wellness concept, sketching out restructurings or expansion plans during hikes with Zuckerman. Zuckerman regularly sees guests checking into Canyon Ranch to lose weight or recover from their dependence on alcohol, food, tobacco or medication to cope with toxic doses of work stress. He believes to moving closer to work/life balance starts with a

commitment to create new habits and a willingness to live with the imperfect, breathe deeply and look to a longer perspective.

In the next few weeks, Zuckerman will release *Mel's Tips for Healthy Living*. He describes it as a guide for aging, exercise, stress, resilience, weight maintenance or weight loss and adopting a healthy lifestyle. I prod him to share a tip for workaholics like himself: "Don't let yourself become stressed out over things you cannot control," he says.

Meanwhile, if Canyon Ranch Miami Beach condo sales are any indication, wellness is top of mind for people aiming for graceful aging. Since mid-October, buyers have snapped up 46 condo units in the residential tower, citing the lifestyle amenities as the reason for their purchase. As we conclude our conversation on the ocean deck, we hear a fitness instructor giving commands to a mid-morning class. Convincingly, Zuckerman asserts: "I still think adopting a healthy lifestyle is in the infancy stage."