

Melanie "Mel" Erxleben was born in San Francisco where her dad was attending dental school at the time, and in 1954, the family moved to Jacksonville. She got interested in pursuing an assistant dentist career while working in her dad's office while attending school, and eventually obtained a degree as a dental assistant as well as taking additional courses in oral surgery.

Mel lived in Jacksonville's Arlington area with her parents until she married her high school sweetheart, Ernie, in 1973. They lived in Gainesville for some 12 years before moving to Melrose in 1986. Ernie is a retired architect who designed and built their home in Melrose. Mel was an Oral Surgery assistant for 37 years, 34 of which were with Caton & Taylor in Gainesville, before retiring the end of 2008.

They have two children, a daughter Erin, born in 1982 and a son, Evan, in 1986.

Tragedy struck in 2005 when Mel's daughter, Erin, died in an auto accident. The ensuing months and years brought struggles with depression issues and about 6 years ago, she decided to join Genesis Fitness to lose some weight. "I started running, which I fell in love with" she says, "worked out 5 to 6 days a week, and lost 35 pounds in the process." Mel runs some 5½ miles each day at the gym.

She found that joining Genesis helped her as much mentally as physically and added, "I made MANY friends there in the process".

In addition to working out, she developed a real passion for helping people in need and began mentoring to parents who had lost a child, to help them through the grieving process. She found it helped her with her own healing. In addition, she started a scholarship at Keystone Heights High School in memory of Erin, her daughter. Then, in her pursuit of helping people, Mel adopted a young family in need and, with the help of Community Church, was able to provide them with clothes, a crib for their baby, diapers and other needed furniture. She would also bring them food, baby formula and other needed household items, on a regular basis.

Mel's latest project is making "Blessing Bags" that she always keeps in her car. They contain items like snacks, socks, lotion, chapstick, band aids, tissues, hand wipes, etc., and she gives them out to the homeless people she runs across. "Reaching out to others serves as a reminder as to how blessed I really am!" She added.

Owner Todd Sigmon added that Mel is definitely an inspiration to all of the members. "She usually is already at the door at 5:30 every morning when I come in to open the fitness center" he says. "Mel is one of the most consistent members we ever had," he added.