



ANA VENEGAS, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Robert Layton guides a fitness class for Spencer Recovery Center in Laguna Beach, where he sense a healing power in being at the ocean's edge. Layton who Know what it means to lead a transformed life, also works with regular fitness clients, employing a mixture of strength training yoga, Pilates and martial arts.

# FINDING A FITTER LIFE

**LAGUNA BEACH** · Bronzed and ripped, his blond bangs splashing down to his dark shades, Robert Layton guides the fit and would-be fit as they work out on the sands of Laguna Beach.

The 51-year-old looks ridiculously healthy. By all appearances, he's the iconic O.C. beach boy with a life as gorgeous and bountiful as the Pacific that shimmers before him.

"Look at those abs!" Layton says, singling out a student as the group performs his preferred mix of strength training, yoga, Pilates and martial arts.

Thrust! Thrust! Thrust!"

At that, Layton's nine fitness enthusiasts, in unison, stab their feet forward off the sand; first left, then right.

Robert Layton, a fitness instructor whose passion is helping addicts, knows the climb his clients face. He was once a homeless alcoholic.

Once – if you knew him well – you wouldn't have.

Like all addicts, Layton was a liar. He maintained the facade of robust, beach-boy living – a blessed life of money, wealth, women.

But when he went running, the liquid in his Gatorade bottle was whiskey. Growing up in Corona del Mar, the youngest of three children, Layton always felt he couldn't live up to the expectations of his father, a former Los Angeles city clerk. He says he also felt he couldn't match up with an older brother, Steve, who ended up becoming a successful property management executive.

Starting around age 14, Layton drifted.

And, in the '70s, a teen could really drift.

Layton dropped acid and immersed himself in guitar. He surfed nonstop and practiced

martial arts.

He attended Corona del Mar High, but didn't graduate. Still, he managed to hold down jobs, even as his life was awash in booze and other drugs.

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By age 21 he had three DUIs.

On Christmas Eve 1987, when he was 26 and just sprung from jail, Layton took up home in that Laguna Beach bush.

He had a routine. Layton would shower at Main Beach, then don his surfer clothes – his costume of carefree, successful living – and chat people up.

He also panhandled. And stole. Women and acquaintances sometimes took him in, but any money Layton got, through any means, went straight to drugs and booze.

"My theme for the day was to get loaded," he says.

# FIT: A life changes

"For that to happen, I would have to do a lot of scary things."

A half-a-fifth of whiskey, a fifth of whiskey (that's 17 shots); some days more. Layton's daily intake grew but he just felt normal, not drunk.

Three more DUI's by age 28 That felt normal, too.

In the fall of 1993, when Layton was 32, he saw the picture that would change his life.

A friend dropped some film for processing where Layton worked, Supercolor Imaging (still in downtown Laguna). And when there was something to look at, Layton noticed the 5-foot-2 woman with reddish brown hair.

She had an energy about her. OK, Layton thought.

*I want to live.*

Through the friend, Layton met the woman in the picture, graphic designer Melissa Darwin. In October 1994, they married.

He was sober when he said "I do," but his addiction was still raging.

"She married potential," Layton says.

His last drink came four months later. Melissa was at work and Layton – having just downed a half gallon of vodka – sat on a couch watching the

O.J. Simpson trial.

"I thought, 'I have been through a lot of stuff, but this is the lowest point in my life.' I then got on my knees and asked God for help. I had a spiritual awakening," he says.

"At that moment, I knew I had had my last drink.

"The next morning, at 7, a friend picked me up and took me to a recovery meeting.

"I never stopped going." ●●●

It's another morning in Laguna and Layton, riding a stand-up paddleboard, guides small clusters of newbie paddlers well beyond the break point.

He takes two or three at a time far into the chilly water, before returning for a couple more.

"They're numb to everything," he says of these special clients. "This opens up their world. This is a gateway to feeling."

Layton credits his sponsor in sobriety, Austin-based Dr. John Land – a self-described certified biofeedback therapist, medical intuitive, energetic healer and teacher – with keeping him clean. He also points out the support of his wife, now 48. The couple have a daughter, Keala, 8.

He's also keeping clean as example.

Though most of Layton's workout clients don't have problems with addiction, his passion is to help alcoholics and other addicts become and stay sober. He does this through what he describes as a combination of fitness, Native American spirituality, a 12-step program, and the healing powers of the Pacific.

For now, some Layton clients are residents of Spencer



**Robert Layton found transformation through fitness, Native American spirituality, a 12-step program and the magnificence of the Pacific Ocean.**

Recovery Center in Laguna Beach. And he's reaching out to other drug and alcohol rehab facilities to work as an independent contractor and conduct fitness camps.

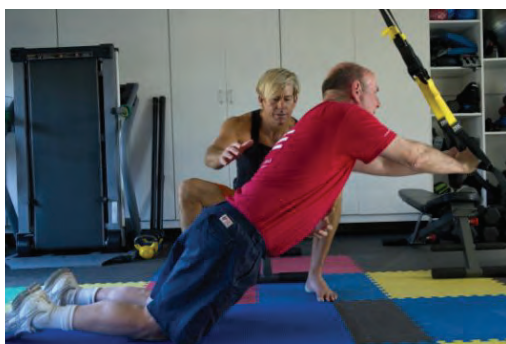
On the morning of the paddle, the ironically named Samuel Adams, a 22-year-old painkiller addict from Charlotte, N.C., says he appreciates Layton's classes.

"He told me his story. It's really awesome to see someone who came from where he did doing what he's doing now."

Fellow painkiller addict Dennis Lee, 20, from Tampa, Fla. (many of Spencer's clients are from out of state), agrees.

Getting in shape makes

David Marks, right ssays fitness instructor Robert Layton helped him improved after he suffered a stroke. Layton owns Drag onfly Fitness in Laguna Beach.



Layton, now a muscular tanned specimen of health, works out not far from the surf's edge. Recalling his past, Layton says, "My theme for the day was to get loaded."





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Robert Layton struggles with his wife, Melissa - who an enormous support in his journey out of alcoholism and drug abuse - and their dog Huckieberry, on a recent afternoon in Laguna Beach. He was still caught up in his demons when they wed in 1994. "She married potential," he says.

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Daughter Keala, 8, dances as Layton strums his guitar. In addition to music and his business Layton finds satisfaction in offering fitness training for people trying to kick substance addictions

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## FIT: One time addict calls the ocean 'a gateway to feeling'

Fellow painkiller addict Dennis Lee, 20, from Tampa, Fla. (many of Spencer's clients are from out of state), agrees.

Getting in shape makes me feel better," Lee says on his fifth day of sobriety. "And this is fun.

"It's a lot easier to connect

with someone who's been through (addiction) too," he adds.

Recovering alcoholic Trisha Burdick, 44, from Knoxville, Tenn., says she came back to Spencer following a recent relapse specifically to work with Layton and get her endorphins hopping.

Still wet from the ocean, and shivering slightly, Burdick sums up the group's morning with Layton.

"This is what we need."

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A weathered 1973 Fender Stratocaster, its gray-green paint long yellowed, hangs in the living room of Layton's house.

"See that guitar?" he says. "I



Layton draws applause from daughter Keala as he does a skateboard handstand during a relaxing afternoon at home. It's far different scene from the one, Layton, now 51, knew when he was a homeless addict.



Robert Layton teaches a workout class for the general public on the beach in Laguna. Layton found transformation through fitness, spirituality, a 12-step program and the magnificence of the Pacific Ocean.

slept with that in the bushes in Laguna."

It was the only thing he didn't sell for drugs or alcohol. He says he slept on the case to keep it from getting stolen.

Layton explains this as he gets ready for dinner with his wife and daughter.

In this case, getting ready means taking a homemade fan (fashioned from driftwood and pelican feathers), lighting up a stock of sage, and using the fan to waft smoke over Keala's body.

"This is called 'smudging,'" he explains. "It's a Native American way to cleanse the spirit. The pelican feather represents mothering, nurturing and energy."

Sure, go ahead and laugh.

Tell yourself that Layton is the quintessential loopy middle-age surfer dude, proud of his tan, his 7 percent body fat, and his habit of spouting classic SoCal musings about spirituality, self-actualization and oneness with the universe.

But remind yourself, too, that he's a father, husband and business owner, and that today, June 9, he celebrates 18 years, three months and 19 days of sobriety.

And perhaps lodge in your brain the following words:

"Smile, smile, smile," Layton tells a woman sweating out some of his commands during a workout session on Main Beach.

"Keep smiling," says Layton, flashing his own Hollywood grin.

"Smiling," he adds, "relaxes the face."

Register staff photographer Ana Venegas contributed to this story. For more information about Layton and his exercise classes visit

[dragonflyfitness.net](http://dragonflyfitness.net)

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