

1

IN MINNEAPOLIS



Crazy Little Thing Called Love

BY ALISON MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER YANG



How one gleeful man...

...chored a bunch of seniors and put a song back in their hearts.

“Can any bod-eeee find meeee...?” Michael Matthew Ferrell punches a fist in the air, his booming voice filling Edina Morningside Community Church as he nails the high note Freddie Mercury famously unleashed in the 1976 Queen hit “Somebody to Love.”

SEATED SECTION by vocal section in the pews in front of him are the members of Alive & Kickin, a spirited choir of over-60 singers who perform rock and pop songs at local nursing homes, community centers, and theaters. It’s a Monday in late March, and today marks rehearsal No. 32 of 40 in the group’s tireless preparation for “Love is Alive ... & Kickin,” a new show they will perform seven times in June at Minneapolis’ Old Arizona Theater.

An hour from now, they will sing this gospel-rock roof-raiser in its entirety (it’s one of 20 songs on their set list for “Love is Alive”). But for now, Ferrell’s soaring vocal serves only as a segue into the warm-up led by 25-year-old musical director and pianist Jason Hansen. “Sit tall!” yells Hansen, whose slight frame bobs up and down as he leads the group in a series of gullet-warming *ooo-ahhs*, *me-oh-mes*, and *bee-dee-bees*. Ferrell, Alive & Kickin’s 52-year-old founder and creative director, rests on a rickety black stool next to the piano, thumbing through the binder of sheet music on the stand in front of him. The first song on today’s rehearsal schedule is The Partridge Family’s

“I Think I Love You.” After the requisite handing out of paperwork—set lists, dates and times for dress rehearsals and performances—Alive & Kickin’s nine male vocalists kick off the kitschy ’70s superhit with a baritone rumble:

“I’m sleeping / And right in the middle of a good dream / Like all at once I wake up / From something that keeps knocking at my brain...”

Across the aisle, the women softly enter:

“Before I go insane I hold my pillow to my head / And spring up in my bed screaming out the words I dread / I think I love you!”

The church fills with sound as the choir mem-

bers, clad in trademark red and black attire, swing their arms to the buoyant tune. Ferrell leaps in the air and lands with an exaggerated thud, his hands spread wide. “Great diction, gentlemen,” he says, scurrying to the row of pews that nestles his bass section. “We need that youthful, adolescent energy here.”

As he makes his way back to the center aisle, Ferrell eyes Pat Faunce, an alto with gentle blue eyes and a silver, buzzed haircut, whose own binder of sheet music she holds in front of her. “Of course,” Ferrell gently teases, “it would be a lot better if you learned the words.”

EVEN WHEN SEATED, Ferrell’s hyperkinetic energy is undeniable. The day before rehearsal, I joined him and Linda Rein, an Alive & Kickin member and also the group’s managing director, for breakfast at a hip eatery near the apartment Ferrell shares with his partner Jeffery Nelson in the leafy Minneapolis neighborhood of Loring Park. Wearing a slim-fitting plaid cowboy shirt and Levi’s rolled into a wide band at the top of each of his utilitarian brown boots, Ferrell appears as if his muscled legs might at any time propel his slim, 5’10” frame out of the seat and into the air. You also get



Living Out Loud
Micheal and the gang
rehearse at the Old
Arizona Theater.

the sense that he might burst into song at any moment. In fact, he often does.

“Our current show is all about love,” he says excitedly. “Every song has the word love in it. We’re doing Tina Turner, Nazareth, Bon Jovi. Lots of power ballads, like that Foreigner song. You know—” And then he leans forward and sings, at a hushed yet utterly

emphatic volume, “*I wanna know what love is / I want you to show me...*”

At once it becomes apparent how this ebullient character could bring together a group of aging performers—some with a musical background, others without—and transform them into an ensemble that confounds stereotypes, stirs audiences, and provides incentive for its members to, well, stay alive.

It was about two years ago that Ferrell, whose professional career as a choreographer and theater director spans three decades, had the idea of organizing the group.

“I had seen the movie *Young@Heart*, and I was just so inspired by it,” he explains, referring to the 2007 documentary that followed the eponymous vocal group—another collection of crooning seniors—through several rehearsals and a performance in their hometown of Northampton, Massachusetts. The film captures the often tedious sessions in which the Young@Heart chorus attempts to master songs like Sonic Youth’s “Schizophrenia” and The Pointer Sisters’ “Yes We Can Can” under the direction of its implacable leader Bob Cilman. Ferrell has seen the film five times. “I laugh and I cry every time,” he admits.

Another, more subtle inspiration for Ferrell was his own childhood. “I’m the son of a cop and a Rockette,” he says. “It was anything but cookie-cutter.” Growing up, Ferrell and his sister Mary spent many weekends at their grandparents’ house in Orange County, California. “I got this sense of nurturing there that was different than being with my parents. ‘Now, Catherine Antil’—the outspoken, 87-year-old wise-cracker of Alive & Kickin—‘is my Grandma Ferrell.’”

In March 2010, Ferrell was providing private instruction to a young dancer named Hailey Sowden. During breaks, she often spoke fondly of her grandparents—Diane Sowden, an actress and opera singer, and Bill Sowden, a choral conductor. That spring, Ferrell, whose weeks are typically filled with production meetings and daylong rehearsals, was at the start of an unprecedented four weeks of downtime. With *Young@Heart* in mind, he approached the Sowdens.

“You’re connected in the senior community,” he remembers saying to them. “Do you think this is something people would do?” The Sowdens are members of Edina Morningside Community Church, located in a residential neighborhood about eight miles southwest of downtown Minneapolis. Excited by Ferrell’s pitch, they phoned friends and fellow congregants. In the meantime, Ferrell posted flyers in senior centers and spread the word in the theater community. “Thirteen people showed up to the first audition,” Ferrell recalls with a laugh. “And I took them all.”

These days, Alive & Kickin is comprised of 25 performing members; Ferrell; his partner Jeffery Nelson, who helps coordinate production

served with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in World War II; Joan Thatcher, a breast cancer survivor, was crowned Mrs. Minnesota in 1981 after creating a one-woman show on the disease. Even Ferrell’s mother Dyan, the retired Rockette whose bright eyes and cropped black hair conjure up a gracefully aged Elizabeth Taylor, is part of the group.

In two years, Alive & Kickin has performed 32 times and produced two full-length theater shows. They were an instant hit. Five weeks their inception, Ferrell received a phone call from a woman who asked if they could perform at a church luncheon in nearby Minnetonka. That’s when Ferrell—who knows every lighting designer, makeup artist, and sound engineer in town—frantically pinged his network. Without hesitation, one theater professional after another came to his rescue, offering their services free of charge, to help pull off those first few shows.

“We had six weeks to prepare for our first show, and I just started hammering them with material,” Ferrell says of the under-rehearsed members. “A lot of choirs use sheet music when they perform, but I felt strongly that that was not who we were. There’s a different dynamic when you’re singing with your head in a book. I wanted us to really connect with the audience. So I made them memorize it.” The first assignment? Queen’s “We Will Rock You.”

The show was a disaster, Ferrell concedes. “No one remembered the words. But it didn’t matter. The people watching were on their feet. At that moment, I knew it was right. I knew we needed more rehearsals—but I knew we had something special.”

As weeks passed and the word spread, additional people asked to audition, including Linda Rein. A year and a half later, Ferrell and Rein, 63, are virtually inseparable. “We talk two, three, eight times a day,” Ferrell admits joyfully, laying a

“A lot of choirs use sheet music when they perform, but I felt strongly that that was not who we were. There’s a different dynamic when you’re singing with your head in a book. I wanted us to really connect with the audience.”

details and occasionally keeps the beat on a wood block or tambourine; and musical director Jason Hansen, who plays piano during rehearsals and spends hours arranging the music to fit the group’s unique vocal parameters. Members range in age from 62 to 94, and their life stories read like a row of history books: Milo Schield, Ph. D., worked as a physicist on the Apollo program; Cal Sathre



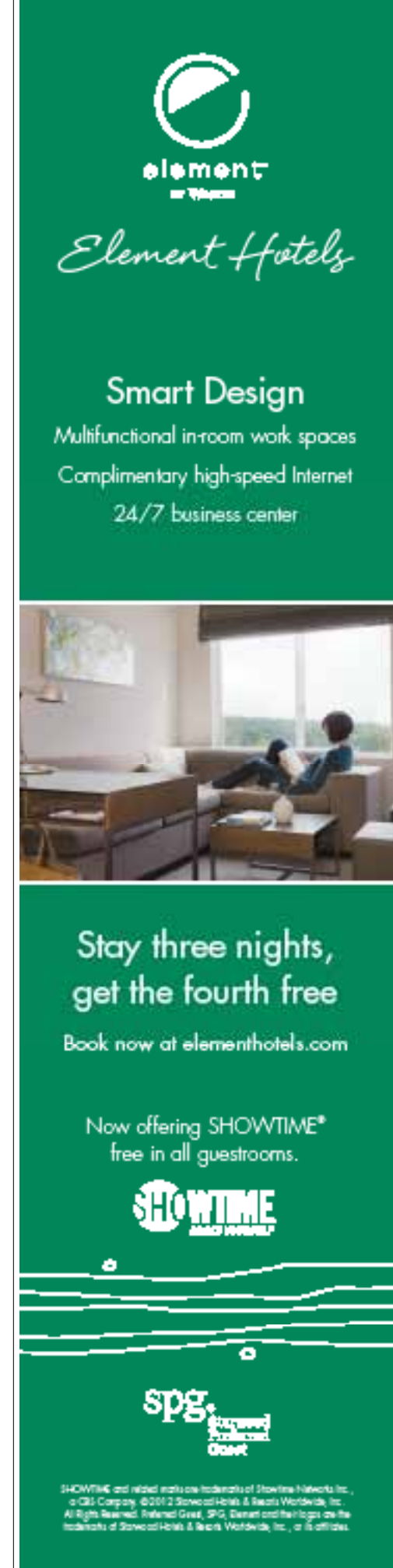
always something playful

Look on the inside and experience attention to detail with a personal touch. Enjoy a dynamic casino floor with more progressive jackpots. Stay in resort rooms thoughtfully designed for relaxation. Discover eight delightful eateries for whatever your palate desires. And, immerse yourself in a world-class spa that inspires wellness.

Stay. Dine. Spa. Play.
There's always something. For you.

Atlantis
CASINO & RESORT SPA
every player's paradise.™

800.723.4500 | atlantiscasino.com




element
Hotels

Element Hotels

Smart Design

- Multifunctional in-room work spaces
- Complimentary high-speed Internet
- 24/7 business center



Stay three nights, get the fourth free

Book now at elementhotels.com

Now offering **SHOWTIME**® free in all guestrooms.

SHOWTIME
MAGIC MOVIES

spg.
Signature Preferred Guest

SHOWTIME and related marks are trademarks of Showtime Networks Inc., a CBS Company. ©2012 Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Preferred Guest, SPG, Element and the logo are the trademarks of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., or its affiliates.

hand on her arm as she sits next to him at the breakfast table.

With shoulder-length flaxen hair and the physique of someone 30 years her junior, Rein embodies the words “age defiance”—except, of course, that the perfectly manicured blond hair is a wig, and her long, lush lashes faux. Over the past 15 years, Rein has endured session upon grueling session

of chemotherapy in her battle against breast and ovarian cancer.

Last December, after a PET scan revealed that tumors were blocking her intestines, doctors insisted that Rein’s prospects were grim. If she wanted to live, they said, she’d need a permanent feeding tube surgically placed in her stomach. Or, she could seek hospice care.

“I kept telling everyone at the hospital, ‘I’ve got to get to rehearsal. I don’t have time for this,’” Rein recalls. “My goal was to get back to Alive & Kickin’.”

And she did. But there’s more to the story. When Rein joined the choir she was providing near-constant care for her daughter Paige, who was in the final months of a fight she eventually lost to ovarian cancer. “She would have been 42 this year,” Rein says. Her voice breaks, and as the tears well up in her eyes, Ferrell reaches across the table to grasp her hand.

“I was feeling pretty down on myself and I was looking for something to get me energized,” she continues. “Michael is the most amazing person I think I’ve ever met. We might feel horrible and sick and weak, and we have chemo, and radiation, and all these things, but when we come together to sing, it all goes away for a few hours. And when we perform for other people, they feel the same way. They come up to us and say, ‘I don’t care what the rest of my day is like, I feel good.’”

During her 10-day hospital stay in December, Ferrell found it impossible to manage Alive & Kickin’ without Rein, who handles the group’s business side. At a loss, he called Rein’s husband, Stan. “I know Linda’s really sick,” Ferrell said to him in a panic, “but I really need her.”

“The worst thing you can do,” Stan responded, “is to give up on her or take away her responsibilities. What I’ve learned about Linda is that you proceed as usual.”

Toting a small bag of liquid nutrients, Rein showed up to the next rehearsal, and has attended every one since.

She swipes a small piece of Belgian waffle through the puddle of syrup on her plate and puts it into her mouth. “My doctor looks at me now and says, ‘I cannot believe

this,’” Ferrell reaches toward her plate and stabs a piece for himself. “For me to be able to do this,” he says, “to steal food off her plate, is a miracle.”

WITH MOST MEMBERS in their 70s, illnesses and physical limitations are simply part of the equation for Alive & Kickin’, but it’s no coincidence that even those with chronic diseases are thriving, according to Dr. Marc Agronin, director of mental health and clinical research at the Miami Jewish Health Systems and the author of *How We Age: A Doctor’s Journey into the Heart of Growing Old*.

“The reason this group is so wonderful is that they show us not only what’s possible as we get older, but what’s probable,” he says. “Too often we think of aging as being a process of decline and decrepitude. We consider it impossible for older people to sing rock music or be involved in such a production; yet, what research shows us—and what we often see in real life—is quite the opposite. Not only do seniors continue to be involved in many different activities, but, I argue, their capability of being creative, broad-minded, and able to think outside the box actually increases—not in spite of getting old but because of it.”

Alive & Kickin’, Agronin says, speaks to the value of human connection. “Memory changes and abandonment are the two things people fear most as they get older,” he notes. “An experience like this shows that people can form new friendships and bonds—and even love in ways that maybe they only thought were possible when they were younger. And that’s rejuvenating.”

For everyone involved, Alive & Kickin’ is a tremendous commitment. By the time the seven-show run of “Love is Alive” debuts this month, its members will have had 40 four-hour rehearsals, three full-day tech rehearsals, and countless hours of at-home practice. They will have

memorized the words to 20 songs, many of which they had never heard before.

This keeps their brains nimble. “Positive human contact is the best brain food you can have,” says Agronin. “And what this group accomplishes is a wonderful brain workout. Because not only are they working on memory skills, but they’re doing it within a very energetic context. Not everyone has to sing in a rock group, but everyone has to find a way to rock their own life.”

Ferrell knows something about rockin’ performances. Much heralded in the Twin Cities—which is second to only New York City in its number of live theater performances per capita—he has choreographed some 100 shows, directed another 20, and, in 2007, was awarded the theater community’s prestigious Ivey Award.

So it’s no surprise that Alive & Kickin’ shows are exactly that: alive and kickin’. Ferrell spends months developing the set list and precisely matching members with solos based on their personality and life experience. Each two-hour theater performance is backed by a five-piece band.

Every song in last year’s show, “Coming of Age,” began with a spoken-word introduction by a different Alive & Kickin’ member, their soliloquies delivered as they stood in a pool of light. “I asked them to think about something that changed their lives, or a historical event that really made an impact on them,” explains Ferrell.

June Griffin, 83, opened the show with this story about her first train ride: “I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1930s. As a little child in a black community, I was unaware of racial segregation. I recall at the age of seven going to visit relatives in Greenville, South Carolina, on a railroad train. The railroad had a policy that all colored people were to ride in one car. I remember the car being overcrowded and people sitting in the aisles on their luggage because all the seats were taken.



RODNEY CARRINGTON

www.rodneycarrington.com

JUNE 14 – 20, 2012
HOLLYWOOD THEATRE

For tickets, call 702.891.7800 or visit mgmgrand.com



element
HOTELS

Element Hotels

Space to live your life

Spacious guestrooms
Fully equipped kitchens
Spa-inspired bathrooms
Signature Heavenly® Bed



Enjoy 20% off
Book now at elementhotels.com

Now offering SHOWTIME®
free in all guestrooms.



SHOWTIME and related marks are trademarks of Showtime Networks Inc., a CBS Company. ©2012 Showtime Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Internet Guest, SPG, Element and Heavenly are the trademarks of Showtime Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., or its affiliates.

Many years later, when I went to Duluth, Minnesota, to visit my uncle, I was able to sit wherever I wanted on the railroad train.” And then she sang the Beatles’ “Let It Be.”

Personal anecdotes factor into “Love is Alive,” as well. They are part of Ferrell’s effort to disprove stereotypes about the elderly—especially among younger mem-

bers of the audience. “A lot of people think seniors are crotchety, old-fashioned, and unaccepting,” he explains. “I want to challenge that. I want the audience to hear Pat Faunce talk about standing up for women’s rights and gay rights in the 1960s and have some young person think, *Maybe I’ve been afforded some freedoms in my life because of people like her.*”

OVER BREAKFAST, Ferrell hinted at his wildly uninhibited directorial style. “My heart fills and I just start dancing,” he says. It’s true. At rehearsal, Ferrell repeatedly leaps into the air, and his high spirits envelop the room. The wooden stool that serves as his post rarely gets used. When he is on it, he rocks back and forth so forcefully that it bends and creaks under his weight. When he needs to consult the sheet music on his stand, he snatches horn-rimmed glasses from the top of the piano and hazily tosses them on his face, flipping through the pages with one hand while conducting the Alive & Kickers with the other.

Ferrell’s robust energy is matched by his profound kindness. When Cal Sathre, 94, whose once stout college football-player build has been chiseled away by time, slowly makes his way to the piano to croon Elvis Presley’s “Can’t Help Falling In Love,” he prefaces his performance by saying, in a broken voice, “I can try.”

“That’s all we *can* do,” echoes Ferrell, with an arm around Sathre’s back.

The reassurance flows between the members, too. Later, as Rich Wolf and Dorris Ann Moore practice their duet of Elvis’ “Love Me Tender,” a nerve-wracked Moore anxiously whispers, “I’m shaking.”

“Why?!” Ferrell asks, playfully. “Because I’m singing!” Moore says with a reticent smile.

The ever-amicable Wolf—who, at age 70, drives a motorcycle, plays hockey, and does bench presses—chimes in. “You’d be allowed to be nervous if you were singing with Elvis, but you’re singing with *me*.”

“I don’t have a lot of confidence,” Moore will privately say later. She’s come through a very rough patch, having lost her parents and her beloved dog Caesar within the

past four years. “But I feel proud of myself for doing this.”

Over and over, Alive & Kickin members dote on their director’s talent—and express their gratitude for him bringing them together.

During a mid-rehearsal break, Pat Faunce, 75, a founding member of the feminist studies department at the University of Minnesota whose self-penned “Love Rap,” will precede “I Think I Love You” in the new show, confides, “This is a group that really pulls together to support each other. There’s a lot of energy here. Michael, in bringing us together, has created a lot of that. It’s been a real shot in the arm for myself and others.”

Bill Sowden, 81, agrees. “Michael is the lifeblood,” he says. In 2006, Sowden had a ventricular assist

“Watching these people go through what they’ve been through and come out on the other side has made me humble. It’s made me grateful. It’s enriched my life in so many ways.”

device, or VAD, implanted in his body. Powered by the battery pack strapped to his belt, it pumps blood from the left ventricle to the aorta, essentially keeping him alive. Then, last September, he was diagnosed with melanoma, the deadliest of all skin cancers. Still, Sowden speaks with the stoicism of a spiritual guru. “I do not fear it,” he says slowly, referring to the cancer. “I say, ‘I respect what you are. I validate

what you are. But you are unwelcome here.”

Ferrell credits the members themselves for the powerful bond and positive outlook. “What happens in that room with those people is something I’ve never experienced in my career,” he says. “When I saw an audience of 1,200 get on their feet *in the middle* of a show, it made me realize that people want to see this, that they are affected by it. Watching these people go through what they’ve been through and come out on the other side has made me humble. It’s made me grateful. It’s enriched my life in so many ways.”

When the entire cast of Alive & Kickin join their voices in well-rehearsed harmony, as they do in “Seasons of Love” from the Broadway musical *Rent*, the joy, the camaraderie, the *love*, is palpable. The lyric asks a perplexing question: How do you measure a year—and the meaning—of a life? In the show, which is set in New York City’s Lower East Side during the height of the 1980s AIDS crisis, the song is sung by characters at odds with their mortality. Yet it is a song of hope. And as Alive & Kickin launches into it, their emotion is unbridled:

“Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,

Five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear.

Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,

How do you measure, measure a year?

In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee,

In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife.

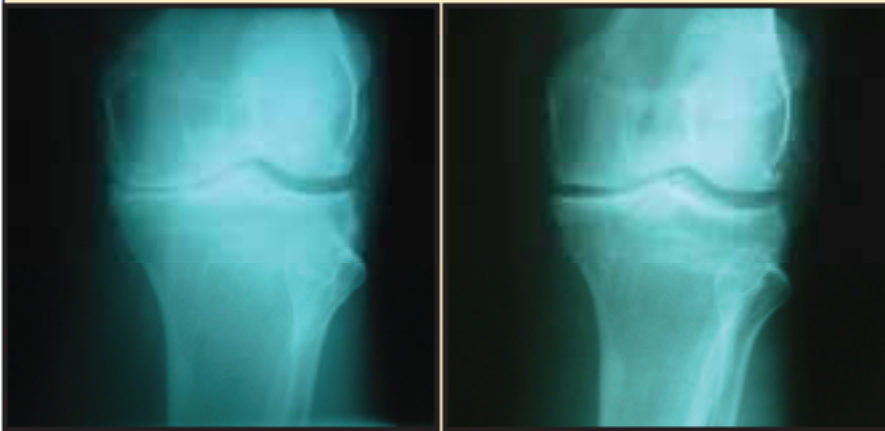
In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes

How do you measure a year in the life?

How about love? ...”

Alison Miller is the senior editor of Spirit. Her favorite Queen song is “You’re My Best Friend.”

THE CENTER FOR REGENERATIVE MEDICINE A NON-SURGICAL TECHNIQUE TO FIGHT AGAINST ARTHRITIS AND SPORTS INJURIES



The Knee Diaries: SJ is a 60-year-old male with the chief complaint of knee pain who visited The Center for Regenerative Medicine over a year ago. He was diagnosed with bone-on-bone osteoarthritis of the left knee, causing much pain and discomfort; at that point he was told only a total knee replacement could help him. He is otherwise healthy. On exam he had point tenderness to the medial side of the left knee (medical lingo: inner side). An X-ray showed severe arthritis of the knee (X-ray on the left). Patient started receiving treatments at The Center for Regenerative Medicine. Today he is feeling better (X-ray on the right).

This is how it works: The physician introduces Cell Therapy into damaged, arthritic cells by means of a precise injection. This process is followed by several other modalities, including Collateral Artery Flow Exercises (C.A.F.E.), in order to accelerate the process. Depending on tissue damage, severity of the condition and the size of the joint that needs to be injected, people usually need a series of 1 to 6 treatments to improve. There is usually no downtime, and people can go back to their usual activities or work immediately. The treatments can help most musculoskeletal problems such as low back pain, neck pain, knee pain, shoulder pain, whiplash, sciatica, tendinitis, sprain, strains, torn ligaments and cartilage damage.

Located in Miami, Florida, The Center for Regenerative Medicine includes a team of professionals that are dedicated to improve your quality of life, paving the way to enhance the science of non-surgical orthopedic medicine. World champions, sports legends, professional and amateur athletes, dancers, and people with just plain pain and arthritis go to The Center for Regenerative Medicine for nonsurgical orthopedic care. Using the facility to improve their condition, thousands of successful cases have been treated over the past nine years.

For more information and to read more on “The Knee Diaries”, please visit www.arthritisusa.net or call (305) 866-8384, International: (305) 866-6995.



Element Hotels

Whole Living

Complimentary healthy breakfast
Complimentary evening reception
24/7 gourmet grab & go pantry
24/7 fitness center



Best Rate Guarantee
Book now at elementhotels.com

Now offering SHOWTIME®
free in all guestrooms.



SHOWTIME and related marks are trademarks of Showtime Networks Inc., a CBS Company. ©2012 Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Preferred Guest, SPG, Element and the logo are the trademarks of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., or its affiliates.