

Sr. Pat Farrell holding two 30-pound dumbbells while training with trainer and spotter Jake Levine at The Yard gym. (Erin Edwards)



by Erin Edwards

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The sun shone through large glass windows at The Yard gym at 7:30 a.m. on a recent weekday in San Francisco. Millennials and Gen Z in yoga pants, sports bras, Chuck Taylors, high socks and fitted shorts stacked weights onto bars, swung kettle bells and pressed dumbbells, while old school hip-hop blared over gym speakers.

Set in stark contrast were Baby Boomer Pat Farrell's white hair, black rimmed glasses, black pants and black shoes. She gritted her teeth, strained and turned red while pressing a 70-pound barbell and saying to her spotter, "Give me a boost. I don't have it," and "Let go. I've got it."

As a 72-year-old vegan nun serving the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, Farrell is an unusual powerlifter.



72-year-old Sr. Pat Farrell lifts two 30-pound dumbbells while Jake Levine, a trainer at The Yard gym, spots her. (Erin Edwards)

In July, The Yard featured her in an instagram post and Q&A article. Then, Farrell won her weight class at USA Powerlifting's California Summer Open for bench pressing 77 pounds and deadlifting 160 pounds, which is more than her own body weight. Several news outlets like KRON4, ABC7 Bay Area, WQAD, Plant Based News and ABC World News aired features about her. Farrell finds the attention overwhelming at times, but also exciting, viewing life as a series of ebbs and flows, yin and yang, dark and light.

Her journey to sisterhood was no different.

Farrell said it was a winding path, fueled by curiosity, meandering through a variety of faith groups. Raised Catholic in San Gabriel Valley, California, Farrell said that after graduating from high school she had a "born again" experience. She became active in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, leading to an interest in missionary work. She enrolled in the Colegio Bíblico Latinoamericano, a Spanish-speaking bible college. After a year, she felt disillusioned, and took a break from church.

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She then explored Christian Science, Science of Mind, a self-realization fellowship, Unitarian Universalism, along with different meditation practices. At the same time, she finished her bachelor's degree in finance with the help of her banking job at First Professional Bank in Santa Monica in Southern California.

Farrell started living a career-oriented life. With the majority of her financial clients being medical professionals from Beverly Hills and west Los Angeles, she was exposed to a degree of wealth and affluence that left her with mixed feelings.

Then, one Sunday evening, sitting on her living room sofa in her late thirties, she tuned into an episode of CBS' "60 Minutes" that changed her life. The special featured Dr. Anne Brooks, a medical professional and Catholic sister, serving as the only doctor in one of the poorest parts of the country, Tutwiler, Mississippi. The glaring contrast to Farrell's life sparked something inside her.



Sr. Abby Newton and Sr. Pat Farrell hiking Mount Whitney. (Courtesy of Sr. Pat Farrell)

In 1995, at the age of 42, she joined the Dominican sisters' collaborative novitiate where she spent a year in St. Louis, Missouri*, with novice women from different

congregations to learn about and practice religious life. That year the novitiate traveled for a ministry experience. To Farrell's amazement, she found herself standing in Tutwiler, the very place that sparked her journey into sisterhood.

"Is it happenstance? Is it coincidence? Maybe. But, is it God? Is it the universe?" she said, "I think so."

The following year, she made her first vows to the Catholic church as a Dominican sister. This meant giving up her own car, money, apartment — and her vegan diet. In those days, the church would not have been welcoming to strict diet restrictions. To ask for specific dietary accommodations would have been seen as a request to cater to personal preferences, rather than a stance based on values. Despite feeling conflicted about animal rights, she decided her draw to the church was more important than food restrictions — a choice she viewed as balancing two goods. She felt it was more important to be a gracious guest to the community that was hosting her, no matter what they served her.

Years later, she saw an opportunity to stop eating meat when her congregation took a stance on non-violence. She chose not to be violent to animals by becoming a vegetarian, and no one argued.



Sr. Patty Boss, Sr. Gene McNally and Sr. Pat Farrell playing music at mass in San Rafael. (Courtesy of Sr. Pat Farrell)

But becoming a vegetarian had an unexpected result — her increased dairy consumption contributed to unhealthy weight gain. When Farrell topped the scale at 213 pounds, she didn't question the culprit.

"Cheese. Cheese. It's called cheese," she said.

She joined WeightWatchers alongside millions of other Americans and started counting her points, a system based on calculating a food's nutritional content beyond calories alone. She noticed she could eat more food if she chose vegetables, and adopted a plant-based vegan diet ever since. Increased awareness of the connection between animal rights and dietary choices meant this time there was less tension with religious life than Farrell had felt before.

But the idea of just maintaining her weight bored her. That's why in March 2025, to gain strength, she hired coach Katya Gorbacheva to train her virtually. Gorbacheva puts a powerlifting routine into a shared spreadsheet, and Farrell fills in the cells with weights and reps between sets.

Farrell tracks her lifts visually too. She takes the time to set her iPhone to the side of the bench, press record on her Apple Watch, then sends the videos to Gorbacheva over WhatsApp for review and feedback. Gorbacheva and Farrell meet once a month through Zoom or Google Meet to discuss her progress.

"I am the tech sister," Farrell said.



Sr. Pat Farrell training with Jake Levine at The Yard gym in San Francisco. (Erin Edwards)

"Vegan," "nun," "powerlifter" and "tech sister," are an interesting set of labels, but she describes them as no more than markers in shifting sand. She'll be 73 years old when she participates in her second powerlifting competition in January. Farrell's goals are to compete in squats, to bench press 90 pounds and to improve her deadlift. Her other goals are to remain curious and try new things with food, technology and meditation. Most importantly, she wants to engage with the people around her.

After knocking out six reps with 30-pound dumbbells that same weekday morning at The Yard, she bantered with the gym's coaches. Farrell regaled how Archie Barrina, a personal trainer and massage therapist, asked her to bless his hands.

Next thing she knew, he had asked two other sisters to bless them as well. She joked with Jake Levine, a trainer and her spotter, that he hadn't asked to be blessed yet. He mumbled about not being religious and said, "I don't really know how it works."

"I don't think any of us know how it works," said Farrell, "If anybody tells you they know how it works — question."

*This sentence has been changed to correct the location, which was wrong due to an editing error.

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