

Enfield Parkinson's Boxing Class Gains Momentum, Plans To Expand

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ENFIELD — Once a week, Frank Kraft looks forward to working his muscles and taking a couple of jabs at his trainer.

"My favorite part is getting to punch the teacher," Kraft said, grinning. "[Boxing's] fun, and it's good for you."

ADVERTISING

Since the town began its weekly Beat Parkinson's Today boxing class at the Senior Center in late February, the program has gained so much traction that the center is adding an additional class in September. In fact, the class has the largest enrollment out of 10 towns in the state hosting the program, founder Michelle Hespeler said.

Kraft and 21 others battling Parkinson's disease are currently registered for the town's class, and 27 have participated in total. The Senior Center has been amazed by the turnout, director Susan Lather said, noting that the center heavily advertised at the onset because it didn't expect the class to fill.

 "Enfield has really taken off," Hespeler said. "There just seems to be a lot of interest."

Each session is a combination of boxing and functional interval training, said trainer Janice Flanigan, who runs the town's class. Activities include toe raises, jabs at various speeds, uppercuts and stretching exercises.

For people suffering from Parkinson's disease — a nervous system disorder that affects movement — boxing is a conducive activity because it "focuses on balance and explosiveness," Hespeler said.

"We do progress so that [participants] get stronger, faster and relieve some of the symptoms that they have," Flanigan said, noting that the program is adaptable for every level of the disease.

Mary Bankowski has been taking this town's class since it started, and said she has noticed an improvement in her balance.

"It's great for my balance, and I started moving," said Bankowski, who was diagnosed three years ago. "Before, because of my Parkinson's, I couldn't do anything."

Jim Niner, an 82-year-old who has frequented the class for 10 weeks, even practices at home and said he hopes to buy his own boxing gloves soon.

"It's given me more strength," Niner said. "I feel a lot better; there are exercises I didn't know about."

This town was the fifth one to begin holding Beat Parkinson's Today classes, Hespeler said. Since the program's inception in January 2014, it has expanded to 10 towns around the state — including Glastonbury, New Britain and Branford — and has 105 people currently participating.

Hespeler, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's herself at age 40, has six licensed trainers running classes for her, though she occasionally teaches sessions as well when she's not working as a physical education teacher at Gideon Welles School in Glastonbury.

A main draw of the class, she said, is its inclusivity and sense of community.

"The group itself becomes a support group because everyone is going through the same thing," Hespeler said. "And you don't feel like people are looking at you weirdly."

While attendees may often start out reserved, many show their personalities and crack jokes by the end of the class, Flanigan said. Wednesday's session at the Senior Center even featured outbursts of singing.

With the program on a roll, Hespeler said, she doesn't intend to slow down. Rather, she plans on starting a licensing program in September for trainers out-of-state in Virginia and Pennsylvania, as well as in any other states that express interest.

"My goal is to share this with everyone I can who has the disease to help them feel better and live their lives better until we find a cure," she said.

Those interested in finding alternate class locations and more information can visit beatpdtoday.com

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