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Boxing Class Helps Keep Those With Parkinson's Active

By Michael Walsh
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Brenda Vanasse, right, is a participant in Michelle Hespeler's Beat Parkinson's Today boxing class. Hespeler, left, was diagnosed with the disease nine years ago. Vanasse was diagnosed with the disease four years ago and calls the class a lifesaver. (Michael Walsh / Courant Community)

It was ironic when Michelle Hespeler, a physical education teacher who was all about movement, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at the age of 40.

The disease, which restricts movement, did everything it could to stop Hespeler from moving around.

Now 49, Hespeler, of Marlborough, is fighting back against Parkinson's with her Beat Parkinson's Today boxing class, which just finished its first session at the Enfield Senior Center.

"People with Parkinson's move slowly," said Hespeler, who is a physical education teacher at Gideon Welles School in Glastonbury. "This helps with balance. It helps with explosiveness. It makes both sides of the body work together."

The results are there, she said. After first being diagnosed with the disease, the right side of her body was stiff and her arm was stuck in place. After working with a trainer, that problem started to go away.

"It was devastating [to be diagnosed]," Hespeler said. "But I'm very active now. There are things I physically can't do as well, but I work really hard on staying healthy now."

She also sees a change in her students, which covers a wide range of ages up to 88 years old.

"They change their whole attitude on life," Hespeler said. "They used to just sit in a chair and watch TV and they kind of gave up. Once they come here, they feel empowered and alive again."

Brenda Vanasse, 53, was diagnosed with Parkinson's when she was 49. She's been taking Hespeler's boxing class for the last year and a half and said it's improved her life physically and mentally.

"With this disease... I had to give up my career," Vanasse said. "This has been an amazing transformation for me because I was very depressed and had anxiety. Starting the exercise program took me out of that and brought me back to where I felt more human."

Vanasse said the class has even improved her walking, because she doesn't find herself shuffling as much as she used to. And now, she can even run and jump rope.

"I've even started to run again," Vanasse said. "It's something I did when I was much, much younger. When I'm running, I feel more like myself."

Vanasse takes Hespeler's class almost every day of the week. Sessions are offered around the state in New Milford, Branford, Old Saybrook, Glastonbury, Marlborough, New Britain, and now Enfield.

"It's been a lifesaver for me," Vanasse said. "I exercise every day now. I focus on my health. My job now is to take care of me. That's my full time job right now. To get stronger and do whatever I can to slow the progression of this disease down."

Hespeler, who employs trainers to help run the classes, said the fact that she too has Parkinson's helps her connect to those in the class.

"I know what they are going through," Hespeler said. "My trainers don't live it. I live it with them, which people appreciate. They like the fact that I get it with them."

Hespeler said she encourages anyone with Parkinson's to contact her about the class. More information can be found on her website, beatpdtoday.com, or by calling her at 860-463-3747.

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