

free**classes**

Cancer fight goes to the gym



BARRY SLOAN

Jacqui Errico, right, leads her Strength for Life exercise class for cancer patients at World Gym in Wantagh.

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

Strength for Life, an exercise program for cancer patients, was created in response to the death of a mentor.

A little more than a decade ago, Jacqui Errico and Debbie Hughes were working as personal trainers for Evelyn Knapp, the Bay Shore-based co-founder of Personal Training Institute, a chain of one-on-one training studios. When Knapp was diagnosed with breast cancer, Errico recalls, "it took everyone off guard. She was the epitome of fitness when you looked at her."

Knapp continued to train through her treatment. "She said it was the only thing that gave her a sense of control in a situation that was out of control," Errico recalls. Knapp also obtained one of the first certifications then available for fitness professionals in dealing with cancer patients. "At the time, the attitude was still bed rest was best," Errico said. "She wanted us all to learn how to train cancer patients."

SPECIAL CERTIFICATION

When Knapp died in 2005, at age 40, Errico and Hughes followed through on her wishes and

earned specialized certification in training cancer patients. They also went out and delivered the message, speaking to local support groups about the benefits of physical activity to those battling the disease. What they found was an interest but a lack of opportunities, so the two trainers began holding regular hourlong strength-training programs geared to cancer patients. They started in a basement, moved to a Curves in St. James and then to Stony Brook University Hospital. Now they offer weekly classes at seven locations in Nassau and Suffolk (the eight-week winter program is wrapping up this week; the spring session starts in April).

The classes, which are free, involve a half-hour of standing, resistance-training movements — using primarily resistance bands — followed by 15 minutes of core exercises and 15 minutes of stretching.

In the eight years since the program started, the number of individuals in the program has risen from a handful to a total of about 50 in the seven winter classes. Most of the participants are women over age 50.

Meanwhile, views on exercise for cancer patients have evolved. Research suggests that cancer patients who were physically active during

and after treatment had less fatigue and nausea, improved blood flow and an improved quality of life. Now, the American Cancer Society recommends physical activity for patients (although there are, of course, caveats, depending on the type of cancer, treatment and health of the person, so patients should check with their oncologists before starting any exercise program).

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Word is getting out about Strength for Life. Michelle Steinberg of Woodbury, 59, who was diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer in January 2014, saw a flier for the program in her doctor's waiting room. "I was excited about going," says Steinberg. "I was looking at it as another avenue that could help."

She started in October, after her treatment was complete, and has been taking the classes weekly at World Gym in Wantagh. Steinberg likes the social environment of the class and the value of interacting with fellow patients and with Errico.

"You're with other people in similar circumstances, so there's an automatic common bond," she says. "And you know there's someone there that's trying to help you."

For more information, strengthforlifeny.org