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Exercise Specialists Help Cancer Patients Regain Their “Strength For Life”

by Rachel Sokol

When Evelyn Knapp lost her battle with breast cancer, her friends Debbie Hughes and Jacqui Errico formed Strength for Life in Knapp's memory. After being diagnosed with breast cancer, Knapp continued exercising throughout treatment. She said it gave her a feeling of control in an uncontrollable situation.

With Knapp as their inspiration, in 2007, Hughes and Errico officially launched Strength for Life, a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting men and women who are living with cancer reclaim their lives with a safe exercise program.

Hughes and Errico are Certified Cancer Exercise Specialists who received their special certification from Eric Durak, a renowned cancer wellness specialist based in Santa Barbara, California. Hughes and Errico train patients who are undergoing cancer treatment, or are cancer survivors.

“Our clients use modalities such as rebounders, tubing and physioballs to gain strength and flexibility,” says Hughes. According to Hughes, research has shown that when exercise is part of a cancer treatment plan, one's recovery and quality of life is greatly improved.

Traveling can be difficult for some clients, so when Hughes and Errico attend a support group in either Nassau or Suffolk Counties to discuss what they do, they'll find out where everyone lives, then secure a location near everyone, so the support group members can receive fitness treatment without traveling too far from home. “We'll canvas out which gyms or spaces are available and ask if they'll donate space,” says Hughes. Each fitness session is eight weeks long; two days per week at various locations throughout Long Island.

Hughes says that because her clients are of various ages and stages in their treatment, she'll usually start beginners off with lower-level tubing exercises using exercise bands that are gentle on the joints. “Then we move in progression into different modalities, as the clients become more advanced.”

Hughes says, “One of our clients had lymphedema (a swelling), usually a side effect of radiation or when lymph nodes are removed. We gave her a mini-trampoline to do knee bends every day, starting with ten minutes a day.” According to Hughes, the client did this every day for about a month, greatly reducing the swelling in her chest. The client was able to build up to about an hour of compressions a day, because, according to Hughes, rebounding helps push the lymphatic fluids through the body.

Recently, Strength for Life hosted their first “Focus on Fitness” wellness weekend at the Hilton Garden Inn in Islip. Those in attendance were in cancer recovery or in treatment. Guests attended weight-training classes, yoga, tai chi, reiki and more. There were also two guest lecturers: Erin Ley, a cancer survivor and author; and Dr. Roxanne Carfora, an anti-aging specialist. “We provided classes, lectures and information on how to safely incorporate fitness of the mind, body and spirit into the client's current lifestyle,” says Hughes, who hopes to plan another wellness weekend fairly soon.

What makes Strength for Life truly unique from other types of cancer-fitness treatments is that the fitness classes are free. “People sometimes say we should charge for the classes—but we won't, and we're adamant about that,” says Hughes.

Someday, Hughes and Errico would like to take their organization to a national level. However, for now, they're just spreading the word about the services they offer. “We love helping the people; sharing our knowledge,” says Hughes. “We believe in this form of healing because exercise is the best feeling.”



Strength For Life

Strength for Life is located at 902 Constance Lane in Port Jefferson Station. For more info, call 631-974-3346 or visit strengthforlifeny.org.