

Riverdale gym touts exercise for people with spinal cord injuries

June 5, 2011

Written by Abbott Koloff | Staff Report



Riverdale, June 1, 2011 -- Push to Walk offers exercise for people with spinal cord injuries. It's a non profit. Owner is Cynthia Templeton. Her son Darren Templeton was her inspiration for opening the facility, based on something in California a. _Karen Mancinelli/Staff photographer MOR 0605 spinal cord

RIVERDALE — Franklin Crespo, a quadriplegic, was strapped to a harness as trainers moved his feet on a treadmill to simulate running, even though he hasn't walked in seven years while his legs withered.

He's one of about 30 clients who exercise regularly at Push to Walk, a non-profit gym for people with spinal cord injuries based on a similar program in California. The operators say they help people work on areas traditional physical therapy sometimes ignores, muscles in areas where people have no feeling, limbs that are no longer being used.

"We focus on the whole body," said Cynthia Templeton, whose family founded the gym. "Every one of our clients has had gains in strength. Some have been able to stand independently. Some have been able to take a few steps."

Push to Walk is an independent offshoot of a program called Project Walk in California. Templeton and her husband John, who live in Kinnelon, opened the gym in 2007, three years after their son Darren dove into shallow water in Barnegat Bay and fractured the C5 and C6 discs in his neck.

Darren Templeton, now 25, has an incomplete spinal cord injury and is diagnosed as a quadriplegic. He has use of his biceps, but not his triceps, and not his legs. He said he believes exercising all of his muscles, even those not used for everyday activities, has kept him healthy enough to go to college and graduate school. He received an MBA from Rutgers last month.

"You don't have to walk," he said. "There are steps in between to improve your quality of life."

Medical experts have been debating the merits of such programs. Unlike physical therapy prescribed by doctors, they are not covered by health insurance.



Dr. Steven Kirshblum, medical director at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, said recent studies show such therapies can offer some benefits for people with incomplete spinal cord injuries but that clients should be supervised by a physician.

"I would recommend programs based on physician oversight and professional therapy integration," Kirshblum said. "We all have hope that continuing exercise will be beneficial in the long term. We are studying to see what the risks are and what the benefits may be."

Dr. Monifa Brooks, a specialist in spinal cord injury medicine at Kessler, said a few of her patients have been clients at Push to Walk and reported good results. They aren't walking, she said, but say they've had more subtle improvements.

"They say they feel better from the workout, or have more endurance to get through the day," she said. "Whenever you get a person out of a wheelchair, it's a psychological boost to that patient."

Riverdale, June 1, 2011 -- Darren Templeton does balance and strengthening exercise with the help of exercise physiologist Mike Anastasiou. Push to Walk offers exercise for people with spinal cord injuries. It's a non profit. _Karen Mancinelli/Staff photographer _MOR 0605 spinal cord push to wa / staff photo



Riverdale, June 1, 2011 -- With the help of gym aide Christine Uporsky and exercise physiologist Karla Ruaya, Darren Templeton does locomotor training on a treadmill. Uporsky and Ruaya are moving his legs. Push to Walk offers exercise for people with spinal cord injuries. It's a non profit. _Karen Mancinelli/Staff photographer _MOR 0605 spinal cord push to wa / staff photo

sports. He's part of a regional wheelchair rugby team and recently completed a 13-mile half marathon on a hand-propelled bicycle.

"I could have gone farther," he said.

He said he's not expecting to get up and walk just by exercising, but expects his routine to give him an advantage should medical researchers ever find a way to heal damaged spinal cords.

"When medicine meets us halfway with a cure, it will be important to have your muscles ready to be able to walk," he said.

Cynthia Templeton said her program picks up after insurance stops paying for physical rehabilitation. Push to Walk offers specialty equipment unavailable at regular gyms, she said, and its trainers learn about spinal cord injuries during a certification program at Project Walk. The gym's typical \$85-an-hour fee pays for 75 percent of its expenses, she said, with the remainder covered by donations and fundraisers.

Crespo, 34, from New York City, said he hasn't used his legs since he hit his head on the bottom of a pool during a 2004 vacation in Miami. He has some use of his arms and said they have been getting stronger since he started coming to Push to Walk earlier this year. He said it's become easier to push himself around in a wheelchair. And he said his legs aren't as thin as when he started, that they appear more muscular.

"I feel a lot stronger now," he said after an exercise session last week.

Darren Templeton said he has more balance because of his exercise regimen. He said he hasn't had complications such as vascular problems or skin diseases that some people with spinal cord injuries who don't get out of

their wheelchairs suffer from, and that his muscles are more toned.

He has lived in a dormitory at Ramapo College, driven a van with hand controls to classes at Rutgers in Newark and said he doesn't need help with most daily chores. He said he always had been athletic, playing tennis and ice hockey at Kinnelon High School and now plays wheelchair



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