



Lori Douma, who is paralyzed, works out at Push To Walk. Douma works with personal trainer Eric Prol on some core exercises.

(Staff photo: Dawn Benko)

Son's diving accident leads to family business

Kinnelon couple finds clinic to help spinal-cord injury victims

By JANE HAVSY • STAFF WRITER • November 8, 2009

When Darren Templeton walks again, his family is going to be right behind him.

His parents, Cynthia and John Templeton of Kinnelon, founded Push to Walk, a nonprofit spinal-cord injury exercise and recovery center, almost three years ago, to help him recover. Darren Templeton fractured his C-5 vertebrae diving off a boat into the bay at Long Beach Island on July 23, 2004.

A recent Kinnelon High School graduate, he was left paralyzed below his shoulders. After months of rehabilitation at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta and the Kessler Institute in West Orange, Templeton began traveling to Carlsbad, Calif., to work out at Project Walk. He was accompanied by personal trainer and Kinnelon native Eric Prol, who through his work there became a certified exercise-recovery specialist.

Linda Wilson, a family friend who lived near that facility, suggested the Templetons start one in New Jersey. Initially, Cynthia Templeton remembers "rolling my eyes and saying, 'How am I going to do that?'"

Just over a year later, Push to Walk launched in a 1,000-square-foot space in Bloomingdale with just three clients, including Darren. The couple loaned \$15,000 in startup costs to the nonprofit 501c3 corporation and are currently being reimbursed monthly. That seed money was used to buy equipment for the initial facility, adding to what Darren Templeton already had at home and Ramapo College.

Push to Walk expanded to 3,500 square feet in Riverdale — including a 2,000-square-foot gym — in August 2008. The client list had expanded to 15 by that point and they now have about 20 consistently.

Growing the business

Push to Walk usually finds clients by word of mouth or online. The foundation has a Facebook page, is listed on Project Walk's Web site — as one of just four certified providers in the United States — and both Cynthia and Darren Templeton are regular participants on Care Cure, an Rutgers University-based online forum for the spinal-cord injury community.

Prol, who Cynthia Templeton said was integral to the founding of Push to Walk, started "getting eight calls a day" after Project Walk was featured in an episode of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

There are more than 300,000 people in the United States with spinal-cord injuries. Approximately 11,000 new injuries occur every year, or 30 each day. More than half of those injured are younger than 30 years old.

Building clientele for Push to Walk "was surprisingly easy," according to Prol, now a resident of Rockaway. "Once people knew about us, they wanted to come. The biggest challenge was getting the word out."

Clients pay \$85 per hour out of pocket for their training. Sessions last between one and two hours and some clients visit Push to Walk multiple times a week. Insurance coverage is not accepted and costs add up quickly, so client Lori Douma's friends and family host semiannual fundraisers to help pay for workouts. Even Darren Templeton pays for his training, currently cut back to four hours a week while he attends classes in the MBA program at Rutgers-Newark.

Since the other Project Walk-certified facilities are in Austin, Texas, Sanford, Fla., and Overland Park, Kan., Push to Walk sometimes gets long-term visitors who bring their specialized training home. Though the average client is within an hour drive, some have come from as far as Pittsburgh, North Carolina, Rochester, N.Y., and Alabama.

Douma lives in Riverdale, less than a mile from the facility.

"My injury is 8-1/2 years old and my ultimate goal in life is to walk again," said Douma, a speech-language pathologist in the Little Falls School District who has transverse myelitis in her lower back. "I have gone to gyms with other trainers. Because (spinal-cord injuries) are not their specialty, they get it, they understand what I'm going through, but they're not inundated with it all day long. ... You're kind of in your own little home at Push to Walk."

Client billing does not quite cover the costs of operation — Templeton said the biggest expense is staff salaries and training, followed by rent — so Push to Walk also applied for grants. The foundation received \$25,000 from Oritani Savings

Bank in Bergen County, part of which was used for new equipment and part for a scholarship fund. Push to Walk has also gotten \$5,000 from the Integra Foundation, and recently \$1,000 from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. A recent golf outing raised more than \$31,000.

Small staff, big results

Cynthia Templeton is the only paid administrator and only began taking a salary on Jan. 1. Push to Walk employs two full-time trainers, Prol as a part-time trainer, two part-time aides, a part-time Web designer and will soon be adding a college-student intern.

Three volunteers — Valerie Shukovsky, Nancy Josephson Liff, and Elnora Robertiello — have spearheaded Push to Walk's recent more aggressive marketing. Liff is working on a media kit, while Robertiello has organized a client focus group on Tuesday.

Templeton is planning to add more clients over the next six months to a year, and possibly expand into a yet larger space. Push to Walk recently added on-site massage therapy, and is discussing acupuncture. Prol would like to have a pool for hydrotherapy, but admitted it might not be feasible yet.

"The greatest possible achievement is getting rid of your chair," Darren Templeton said. "Most don't, but anything in between nothing and walking is still something. It's still worth working for."

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