

Boxing program punches back at Parkinson's Disease

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GARRETT — Rock Steady Boxing in Garrett is not about knocking out your opponent.

Instead, the internationally acclaimed nonprofit program helps people punch back the various stages of Parkinson's Disease.

Although the degenerative disease has no cure, the intense exercise of the Rock Steady Boxing program has been scientifically proven to delay and even reduce symptoms such as muscle rigidity, tremors and changes in speech and gait.



Dave and Valeska Walker of Garrett are coordinating the Rock Steady Boxing Club.

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The average age for a Parkinson's diagnosis is 62 years. More than a million people have been diagnosed in the United States, with 50,000-60,000 new cases per year.

Rock Steady's high intensity, noncontact exercises include stretches for stiffness, footwork for balance, punching to steady tremors and shouting to counter soft-voice symptoms. The program was developed in Indianapolis in 2006 with a mission to empower people with Parkinson's Disease to fight back. There are now more than 1,700 locations in the U.S. with 51 in Indiana, including the Angola YMCA and Lutheran Life Villages in Fort Wayne, and a new mini-location at Betz Nursing Home in Auburn.

Local program developed

About a year ago, a staff member at the YMCA of DeKalb County asked member Peter Atkin if he was aware of the Rock Steady Boxing program. At the time, some 11-15 members had been exercising at the gym, but could only stretch or swim, without program-specific exercises. Atkin said his son's father-in-law had Parkinson's and participated in the program at another site.

Not a boxer himself, Atkin took notice of Dave Walker punching a heavy bag at the YMCA about a week later and asked if he would be interested in starting a local Rock Steady group. After looking into the program online, Walker agreed to participate.

No stranger to the ring, Walker was a longtime member of the Garrett Boxing Club and a member of its 1970s Golden Gloves boxing teams. He has continued to work out for more than four decades.

In the past year, Walker logged 500-1,000 hours of instruction, training, practice and testing in Indianapolis to become a certified Rock Steady boxing coach while working third shift at a full-time job. Walker and his wife, Valeska, who serves as planning coordinator, have spoken at various monthly meetings of a Parkinson's Disease support group at Parkview Noble hospital to spread the word about the Garrett facility.

"They have connected with the vision on what this place could be," Valeska said of the support group's coordinators, Tim and Donna Smith.

Through visiting other Rock Steady sites across the state, Walker has seen people drive as many as 80-100 miles, three times a week, for sessions. Many from the first local group are from the Noble County support group.

During the first week, retired nurse Peggy Oberley of Fort Wayne, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's two months ago, attended the program following referral by her neurologist. Marvin Heller of Kendallville punched the air while walking around zone cones at the Garrett gym. He was diagnosed 24 years ago. Barbara Grandstaff, also of Kendallville, jumped and boxed her arms while jumping through an agility ladder for footwork drills. She was diagnosed six years ago.

Boxing is only a tool for the program, said Walker. For now, people attending class wear boxing gloves and punch at Walker, who wears sparring mitts. They also step through an exercise agility ladder during drills.

"We keep the goal in front of their faces. If it's not fun, they're not going to come back," Walker said.

Classic rock 'n' roll music plays loudly from speakers. Walker's lead the group in chants like a drill sergeant to "Rock Steady and you can't break my body down," and victory chants at the end of each session.

The program's opening was delayed when Walker underwent major shoulder surgery last winter. The Garrett location opened July 21 to more than a half-dozen participants who are asked to attend three classes a week, eventually lasting up to 90 minutes each. The classes continue to grow each session.

As in boxing, each participant must bring a "corner person" to make sure the participant's blood pressure doesn't elevate too high, and the participants stays hydrated, doesn't get overly tired or fall.

The fee is \$60 per month. Potential participants are evaluated before joining the classes and taught how to fall properly to avoid injury. Down the road, a goal is to have scholarships available for those in need.

Many report seeing a big difference and improvement. They enjoy the camaraderie with others and get pumped up with each other's successes.

The Walkers, who recently celebrated their 40th anniversary, say they are grateful for the opportunity to give back and help people coming to the facility.

"People have come into our lives at the right time. I feel that God is the divine healer. Parkinson's is a progressive disease, but the goal is to arrest the symptoms" and allow a better quality of life, said Valeska Walker, who also works a full-time job.

"People can see little victories, like if they do one more push-up, they come and tell me, because I need the feedback, too," Walker added. "I feel this was meant to be and will take whatever comes."

Atkin serves in an advisory role at the Garrett site and assists with the classes.

The Rock Steady Boxing Club is housed on the first floor of the former Knights of Columbus Hall at 121 N. Randolph St. in downtown Garrett. Building owner Tim Johnson has offered the use of building at no charge for two years. Walker hopes to add large mirrors along the walls for posture, barres for balance exercises and speed bags.

Rock Steady Boxing serves DeKalb, Noble, northern Allen and western Ohio counties.