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SHE'S IN THEIR CORNER

Patti Batt helps those with Parkinson's roll with the punches

BY EMILY McCLUHAN

Patti Batt bounces around the equipment at Hybrid Athletic Club in Fitchburg—heavy ropes, speed bags, free weights, rowing machines. She isn't using these for personal training of competitive athletes though, an area she fully expected to ease into after her retirement from the State of Wisconsin in 2012. Instead she's three years in as the trainer for Rock Steady Boxing, a high intensity exercise program for people with Parkinson's disease. Her passion for this work pours out as she explains the leap of faith that landed her here.

"It was summer of 2015 and I happened to watch CBS Sunday Morning, a show I never watch. Leslie Stahl was doing a piece on Rock Steady Boxing because her husband has Parkinson's," she says. "Something clicked inside me. It was so cool; I knew I had to figure out how to do this."

She already had a few years of personal training under her belt, but she had no knowledge of the disease other than the fact that Michael J. Fox had it. She quickly did some research, then signed up for the three-day training to be a certified coach and make Hybrid the first affiliate gym in Wisconsin. Batt says that after one day of training, she was all in.

Parkinson's is a progressive degenerative neurological disease. There is no test for it and it is typically diagnosed after a slow progression of symptoms like tremors, leg drag and small handwriting. While medication can lessen symptoms in the moment, Batt notes that high intensity exercise has been shown to slow the progression of the disease. She says that, ideally, she catches people as soon as they are diagnosed, before they go into the dark hole of the disease.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY VALERIE TOBIAS



"Secondary symptoms of Parkinson's are apathy, depression and anxiety," says Batt. "So for some of my boxers, just getting here is a huge win."

For people like Mary Greenlaw-Meyer and Joann Pivotto, two-year veterans of Rock Steady Boxing, facing Parkinson's without Batt is unimaginable.

"Rock Steady Boxing has been a lifeline for me," says Pivotto, who was diagnosed in 2015. "I can't imagine doing Parkinson's without Patti."

Greenlaw-Meyer, whose tremors are not visible, deals with balance issues and uses Rock Steady to build strength, stability and confidence that, as her disease

progresses, she'll be able to adapt. She says that Batt hooked her the day she first came to observe a class.

"You see these people, some with gait belts who are having trouble standing on their own and some you would never guess have Parkinson's," she says. "[Batt] has the music cranked and she is just bouncing from person to person. I wanted to be a part of it."

Both women marvel at Batt's energy and uncanny ability to see each person's needs in a class that often has up to 28 people—correcting form, pushing when she hears an "I can't" or just holding a hand on a bad day.

"The classes are exhausting because I'm running around for 90 minutes focusing on a lot of people, but after every class, my heart feels really full," Batt says.

When asked how long she wants to coach this crew, she laughs and says, "The best thing that could happen is they cure Parkinson's and I'm out of a job. Then these people would just be my friends and we could work out together."

Until then, Batt is working to add more classes to support the growing interest.

"One of my favorite things is when someone tells me they got their meds reduced," Batt says. She explains that as the disease progresses, medications become less effective and doses go up.

She admits that it's not all sunshine and flowers. It's a progressive disease and she sees some people progressing faster than others.

"That part is heartbreaking, but in general I see all the positives that it does for people. I know in my mind that I'm helping to slow down that progression and change their perception of their own limits. It brings me so much joy." 🌸

hybridfitness.org/rock-steady-boxing

Check out more photos of Patti Batt and the Rock Steady boxers at BRAVAmagazine.com.

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