

Woman develops exercise program for those with MS

By Jesse Chadderdon
Staff Reporter

"I'm going to keep my body in the best shape I can, so when they find a cure, I'm ready to go," said Vickie George about the exercise program she created for adults with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) at the Brandywine YMCA.

George said "when" rather than "if" because she believes a cure is possible.

George, a former extreme athlete, advanced scuba diver and Major League Fast Pitch Softball player, knows about what is and is not possible after being diagnosed with MS nine years ago.

Her experience pushing the limits as an athlete combined with dealing with a debilitating disease has allowed her to be an optimist and a realist at the same time. She is optimistic that anything is possible – that a cure could be discovered tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that – but realistic enough to know that any exercise will help her stave off her progressive disease while waiting for that cure.

George, a part-time employee at the Brandywine YMCA and an adaptive physical education instructor at the University of Delaware, created the Yes You Can! Program because she saw no opportunities for people with MS to get the physical exercise they need.

"It's so important for people who are physically challenged to get exercise," George said. "It helps to maintain muscle tone, to keep the body in the best shape possible. It also helps with symptoms management."

According to the MS Society, MS is a disease that affects a person's central nervous system and can interrupt the commands sent from the brain to various parts of the body causing fatigue, weakness, loss of bodily control.

George said that before she started an exercise regimen, she used to fall a lot and be more fatigued, but that physical conditioning has minimized those problems.

"But I think the emotional and psychological benefit of it is almost greater than the physical aspect," she said. "The self-esteem you get knowing that you're doing something."

George, who lives in Hockessin, said she trained every member of the YMCA's fitness staff to work with disabled people. Mostly, they assist with getting the person onto the equipment and then acting as a spotter.

Roz Jacono, a trainer at the YMCA, said she is constantly getting more comfortable assisting those in the program.

"I'm starting to feel much more comfortable," she said, as she was helping George pivot out of her wheelchair and into the seat of a leg press. "I was more nervous at the beginning and I wasn't sure how much I should do or whether or not I was hurting them. The biggest thing is just getting to know the needs of each one of them and knowing how much help each one needs and what they can do on their own. The key is open, two-way communication."

George described the staff as "sensitive and compassionate" and said they were enthusiastic about the program.

Marielle Golden, who is studying fitness management at the University of Delaware and also works as a part-time trainer at the YMCA, said she finds the program to be personally rewarding.

"I really enjoy it," she said. "Because a lot of the people haven't worked out a lot before, it's neat to see them make progress and try new things. When Vickie got on the leg press for the first time, we both started crying. The level of improvement has been amazing."

According to George, about a dozen people are participating in the program, many of whom learned about it through an October open house.

"People came in and they saw how friendly everybody was and what a good environment this was for them," she said. "People were really looking for this type of opportunity."

Jerry Brennan works out at the YMCA a couple times per week, commuting from Bear. On Fridays he is also enrolled in a water exercise class with his wife Marie.

Both have MS, and according to Brennan, they



Photos by Ruxana Bhatti
Jerry Brennan works on "lat pull down" exercises with staff member Marielle Golden at the Brandywine YMCA.

were the third couple in the country to both be diagnosed with the disease. He was diagnosed in 1987, but said he began to have symptoms as early as 1981.

"The people here are great," he said. "The staff are helpful, people are friendly. It's a very comfortable atmosphere in which to exercise. People here are very positive, and when you're dealing with something like MS you have to stay away from the negative as much as you can."

Brennan, who said he can walk with a cane for short distances but still had the use of his upper body, said he believed regular exercise would prevent him from losing more functions.

"You've got to use whatever you got of your body or you'll lose that too," Brennan said. "Although I'd like to lose a little bit of my gut."

Robert Merritt, of Brandywine Hundred, was diagnosed with MS in 1981. He said he found out about the open house through Vickie and the MS Society.

"I'd been looking around for a program like this, something that was close-by," he said. "My previous experiences with gyms have been negative but the YMCA did much more in terms of educating their staff to work with individuals with disabilities."

Merritt said he has difficulty walking and typically uses forearm crutches or a wheelchair. He said he has better use of his arms than his legs.

"Exercise is so important for me," he said. "One of the biggest challenges is that people with MS get so de-conditioned. I'm a Web developer and I sit in front of my computer most of the day. The problem is I'm not getting the normal exercise that people get from just walking around."

Merritt said the staff's limited experience in

The Yes You Can! Program at the Brandywine YMCA does not have any charge additional to the YMCA membership. Extra staff members are on hand on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9 a.m. and noon, Fridays between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. and Sundays between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. According to Program Coordinator Vickie George, other arrangements can be made, because all staff members have received the appropriate training.



Jeanine Jennings (left) talks to "Yes You Can" program coordinator Vickie George during an October open house for the program.

working with physically disabled people is actually a positive thing because they ask a lot of questions and are willing to learn.

Both Merritt and Brennan said that in addition to the physical benefits of exercising, that it feels good to do something for themselves.

"It's nice to be able to do something for yourself," said Merritt. "That's the way I look at it. My approach to this and to MS in general is that if there's something that I want to do, I'm going to do it."

"Independence has a different meaning if you're disabled," Brennan said.

Laura Schofield, who is the director of the Health and Wellness Center at the Brandywine YMCA, said she was glad to be able to address a need that was not being served anywhere else in the community. She said eventually she would like to have her staff trained to work with people with other disabilities.

"We're really going to take a stand on this," she said. "We're committed to making more staff available on weekdays and in the future we'll try to purchase some more adaptive equipment. We want to make sure that those who play differently have a place to play."