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Former boxing champ takes on Parkinson's

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FORT WORTH — -- A slender 57-year-old woman shuffles her feet, narrows her eyes at the young man in front of her and throws a punch. Tina Hargrove repeatedly jabs at Tony Lamarr's upper body. Fortunately he's protected by a punch pad and it isn't Lamarr that Hargrove is after — it's freedom from the physical toll of Parkinson's disease.

To knock out some of the effects of the disease — a brain disorder that causes uncontrollable tremors, muscle rigidity, slower movement and balance issues — Hargrove attends former world champion Paulie Ayala's twice-weekly "Punching out Parkinson's" training classes.

Ayala opened the University of Hard Knocks gym on Camp Bowie Boulevard two years ago with the intent to train and manage fighters. But now it's a place where Parkinson's patients can work out to regain some control over their bodies and their lives.

Hargrove, a former marathon runner, said the program helps her build strength more effectively than her yoga and Pilates classes combined.

"I don't have tremors anymore since I've been coming here. I can lift things. I can reach and grab heavy bowls off the top of the cabinet," Hargrove said.

Ayala trains each individual differently, for free, depending on how the Parkinson's has progressed. The Fort Worth native said that at first only 25 percent of his participants could step into the ring without help. Now all of them can not only slip their bodies through the ropes but also bob and weave on the canvas.

"I try to read them to understand what they feel — figure out how to isolate body parts so they can focus on one thing at a time," Ayala said. "One arm. One leg. Their core."

Dr. Saud Khan, a neurologist at John Peter Smith Hospital, said speech therapy and physical therapy are recommended for people with Parkinson's, which starts on one side of the body and gradually progresses.

One million Americans are living with the disease, and 50,000 to 60,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, according to the National Parkinson Foundation. About 4 percent of people with Parkinson's are diagnosed before their 50th birthday, and men are 1 1/2 times more likely to have Parkinson's.

"I think we do have enough evidence as studies show that a boxing program is good for Parkinson's patients," he said.

Roll with the punches

Ayala, who said he was looking for a way to satisfy his philanthropic itch after permanently stepping out of the competitive ring in 2004, got the idea to work with Parkinson's patients when Stacy Christopher came knocking on his door.

A former board member for the Dallas chapter of the American Parkinson Disease Association, Christopher was inspired to visit Ayala after hearing about an Indianapolis-based gym founded in 2006.

"I knew I could help," Ayala said. "Six months later, she came back with more information. We started out with four people."

Ayala works with 20-plus men and women ages 40 to 80.

This week, Gary Schmitz, an original Punching out Parkinson's member and a 13-year patient, along with the group's steering committee, will file to make the organization a federally recognized nonprofit.

There are also plans to expand the program to Dallas and contribute to research on the benefits of boxing training by Dr. Madhavi Thomas, president of the North Texas Movement Disorders Institute.

Thomas urges all her Parkinson's patients who are healthy enough to walk to go to Ayala's gym.

Ayala and Thomas communicate regularly about what kind of therapy the patients need, and Ayala applies that to his training.

"It's not just the arms and the legs that it helps. They also get a trunk workout, which is good," she said. "We have had patients together for almost four years now."

Going the distance

Sweat drips from determined faces as Ayala trains his afternoon class. "Come on, come on. Push," Ayala shouts.

The hourlong exercises vary from punching bag warm-ups to foot agility drills around the ring, where participants jog while alternating their feet.

"When you have Parkinson's, your muscles contract, but it's hard for them to expand, so crossover helps with that because you're focusing," said student Tim Runte, 44, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's in January 2012 and began training at Ayala's gym eight months later.

"People think Parkinson's is an old person's disease," he said.

Runte had tremors in his right hand, his right foot dragged, his arm refused to swing — finally he decided to make a move.

The combination of physical activity and camaraderie at Punching out Parkinson's also staves off depression, Runte said. While focusing on the speed bag and combination punching, he regained strength on the right side of his body, he said.

"Don't sit at home on the couch," he said. "You'll likely find yourself in a wheelchair.

Troy Rynd, 49, holds a 15-pound weight above his head while he lunges and squats during a weightlifting portion of training. In the ring, Rynd punches with such force against the pad that he nearly knocks Lamarr out of the ropes.

Only four months into his diagnosis, Rynd jumps, punches, lifts and bends like a man who can run a marathon, a man who can climb a mountain.

When Don Wells, 80, discovered that he had Parkinson's a year ago, the grandfather to 15 and wakeboard and water-skiing instructor developed trouble with balance, a lack of lower-body strength and stiff arms — all detrimental to his work.

"Last year at the end of the ski season, I thought it was all over," Wells said.

Wells said the program allowed him to regain enough strength to do the occasional quick turn and jump on his board and then "leave the rest to the kids."

Ayala said the class members have changed him from his anti-social former self.

"To be able to see what I do helps them with their lives — well, I feel honored," he said. "You read Scriptures and quotes on how it's better to give than receive, and I know what that means now."

Prescription: Boxing



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