

Get FIT

A Hands-On Approach

by Maryann B. Hunsberger

Through a collaborative partnership between the Family Resource Network (FRN) and Rowan University, a program called Get FIT (fitness, integration, training) has been providing health screenings, workshops, nutrition and individualized fitness services to people with disabilities and their caregivers since 2008. The program was initially funded by a grant from the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJCDD).

Students in Rowan's Department of Health and Exercise Science work with participants to provide them with this unique health and wellness opportunity. Through working with Get FIT, these students, who major in Health Promotion and Fitness Management, act as trainers for people with disabilities, as well as participants without disabilities, three days a week for 10 to 12 weeks.

"It's very hands-on," says Jessica Goldsmith Barzilai, FRN's assistant director. "There is often a 1-to-1 ratio in the gym. They test flexibility, weigh people and test mobility, both before they start and as they go along.

"The student trainers show participants what good, healthy exertion is. It gives people independence. When they complete the training they know what they can do for themselves even when they aren't in the gym."

Over the course of the trainings students helped collect 277 health screenings and created a database on the health of people with disabilities and their caregivers. These were general screenings done in places such as caregiver conferences, not just at the Get FIT program.

Leslie Spencer, Ph.D., Rowan's Health Promotion and Fitness Management coordinator, said she liked the idea of involving Rowan with Get FIT.

"It seemed like an opportunity where we could make a difference for a group of people that has been neglected," she said. "There aren't other programs out there working with people with developmental disabilities, especially adults."

THE RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM SO FAR

In the first pilot, Get FIT saw statistically significant changes in body weight, percent of body fat, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. In their fitness parameters, they saw significant changes in cardiovascular fitness, lower extremity flexibility, and muscle strength and endurance in abdominal muscles, upper body arms and shoulders.

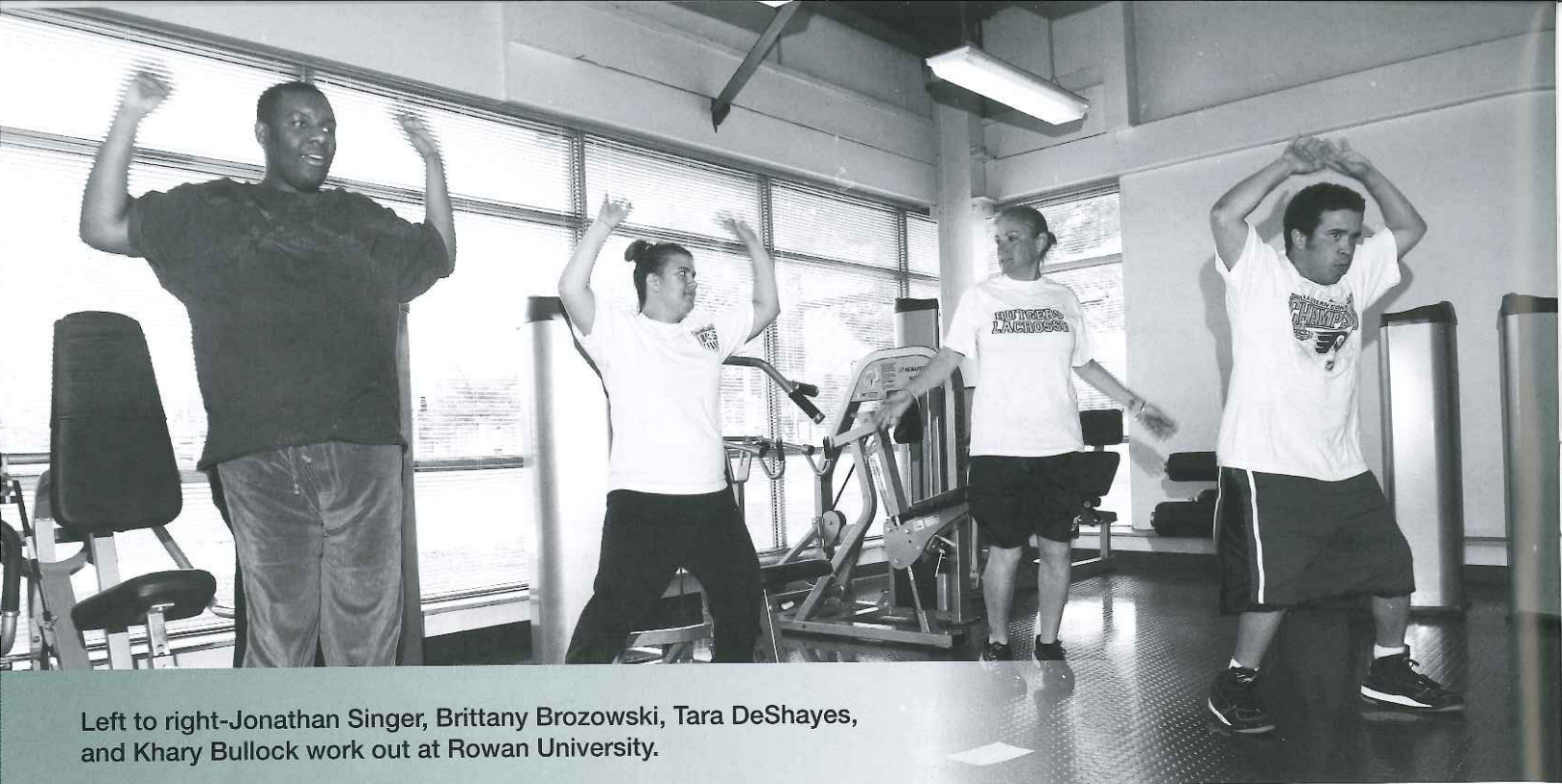
Participants reported improved muscle tone, feeling stronger, having more energy, losing weight, improved mood, less stress, healthier eating habits, more health awareness, more self-confidence, better sleep patterns, having fun, being more alert, having more self-discipline, better socialization, overall well-being and a renewed interest in physically active recreation.

"Since taking part in Get FIT, participants with developmental disabilities reported more interest in doing things like walking the dog, walking on the beach, playing sports and doing things like going bowling," said Barbara Wilhite, program coordinator for the Get FIT Program at FRN. "They also enjoyed being around the students, because they don't typically spend as much time with people their age who don't have disabilities."

In the second intervention, 16 of the participants who completed the whole program—including all pre- and post-assessments—averaged a loss of 11 pounds per participant, a 7 percent decrease in waist circumference, a 2 percent decrease in resting heart rate, a 1 percent decrease in systolic blood pressure, a 5 percent increase in cardiovascular endurance, a 36 percent increase in hamstring/lower body flexibility, and a 45 percent increase in abdominal strength and endurance. Muscular strength and endurance of arms and shoulder girdle increased 12 percent.

One goal for the grant was to increase the capacity of the health promotion field and to increase the number of persons served. This was especially important, since the lack of knowledge

Erin Wojno, a junior and volunteer teacher for the GetFIT program, works with Aaron Burnett.



Left to right-Jonathan Singer, Brittany Brozowski, Tara DeShayes, and Khary Bullock work out at Rowan University.

among fitness professionals about working with people with disabilities has been reported as a barrier to participating in community fitness opportunities.

"We've had 80 plus students participating since 2008," said Wilhite. "The trainers originally thought the machines would be too complicated, that the participants wouldn't be motivated, or that it would be too hard to communicate with them. But those perceptions were unfounded."

Spencer, who had no experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities before this, said the program has been life-changing for some of her students.

"Before this, it wouldn't have occurred to them to work with people with developmental disabilities. Since working in the program, some are deciding to work with people with disabilities as a career."

One thing that impressed Spencer was that people with developmental disabilities "are able to do so much more than non-disabled people might think they can do. They are also able to do more than they themselves think they can do. Sometimes, the participants weren't confident that they could do all the exercising, but they found they could exercise, lose weight and build strength and stamina."

One incident was surprising. "A mostly non-communicative young man one day during the fitness training spoke a sentence while exercising," said Spencer. "The staff members from his community program said they rarely heard him speak a complete sentence. I don't think it was a coincidence that during an exercise session, he felt confident and in control of his body enough to stretch himself to do something that he doesn't often do."

"My students were high as a kite. You could see it in their faces and hear it in their voices. It has been a remarkable learning experience for the students. They've presented at professional conferences to share the Get FIT program and its success. It's been wonderful all around."

THE NEED TO EXPAND

Get FIT will now expand on the current partnership between FRN and Rowan. With additional funding from NJCDD, this year's program also allows individuals with disabilities and their caregivers to participate at locales other than the university.

Barzily said, "We wanted people to know how this will work in the real world, not just in an academic setting."

To accomplish that goal, Get FIT brought in community fitness partners, including Centra-State Hospital's Fitness and Wellness Center in Freehold. The Center will provide a full spectrum of programs designed to improve the health and well being of people with disabilities, including those who have never exercised before.

Another partner, Hometown Trainers, LLC, will include three in-home nutritional counseling visits, one community grocery shopping visit, and one visit on in-home and community physical activity. The focus will be on nutrition and healthy eating and shopping for healthy food choices on a budget.

A third partner—VOLT Fitness, a high-tech suburban gym in Bergen County—combines video games with fitness equipment.

"They didn't set out to work specifically with people with disabilities, but they have had such success with the disability community that it has become their niche," said Barzilay.

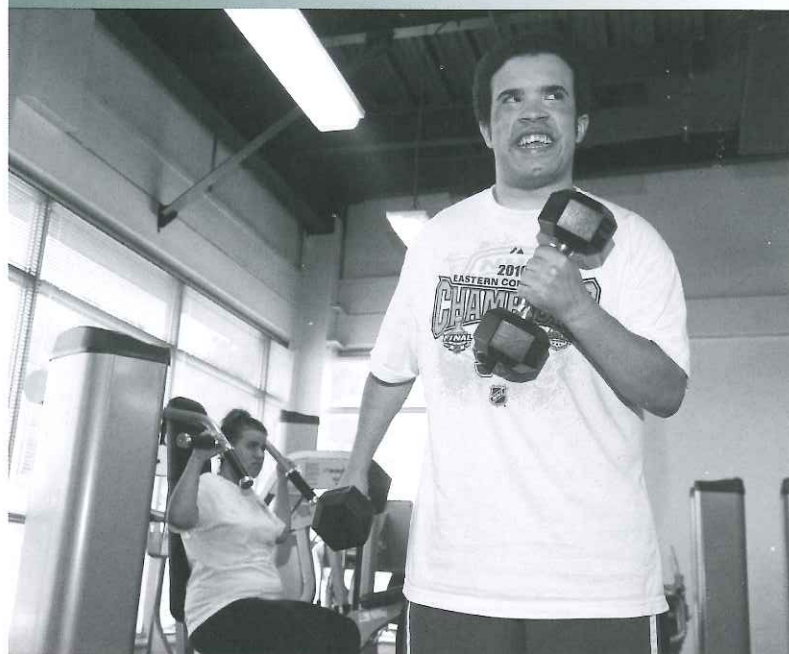
NO LONGER JUST A PHILOSOPHY

Barzilay said that after starting the project, they decided it was more a movement than a philosophy, so they started a statewide coalition that serves in an advisory capacity. They are also start-



Barbra Wilhite at Jennifer Young's home in Gibbstown, NJ. Jennifer takes part in the in home training program by Rowan University. Jennifer rides her bike as part of her in home fitness program.

Brittany Brozowski works out on the weight machine and Khary Bullock lifts free weights.



ing county coalitions beginning with Salem and followed by Monmouth and Bergen.

"As the country talks about wellness and health, we want to be sure that people with disabilities are a part of the solution and can be part of the conversation. We want to be sure people with disabilities can benefit from the solution. We want to assure that people with disabilities have access to anything needed for health and fitness. We don't want people thinking that people with disabilities can't be physically fit or can't go to the gym. We want to change that way of thinking."

The key outcome of this project will be a curriculum and training materials for university programs in health and wellness for people with disabilities and for community service providers. Spencer said Rowan has infused Get FIT into their curriculum so students can put to use in the community what they learned in Get FIT. She hopes Get FIT will be the start of mainstream fitness centers beginning to accommodate people with developmental disabilities and include them in their planning. "We want them to understand that people with developmental disabilities don't always need to go to places like The Arc to work out, but can go to places like the YMCA." **P&F**



Kathy Dougherty knew it was time to get in shape. She was already involved with the Family Resource Network's (FRN) Out and About Program. So when she heard FRN was sponsoring Get FIT at Rowan University through a grant from the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJCDD), she was in the first group to sign up.

And she got her dad Joe to sign up as well.

In the fall of 2009, Kathy, from Merchantville, took part in the first ten week program. Cheryl Tallman, assistant coordinator of FRN's Out and About Program, explains how it all started.

"When we first formed Get FIT, we opened it to Out and About as a way to start getting people involved," said Tallman. "The participants met at

Kathy and Joe Dougherty

GETTING FIT TOGETHER

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our office in Westmont and rode together on the company van to Rowan.”

Kathy, 32, enjoyed Get FIT so much that she joined for the next ten week session in the spring of 2010 and again in the fall of 2010. Joe, 70, joined her for those sessions.

“The students were very helpful and they showed me different exercise routines to do,” said Kathy, who has cerebral palsy (CP). “I like swimming more than the aerobics. We used machines for upper and lower body strength. The cerebral palsy affects my left arm and leg, and I hadn’t been walking fast enough before. The treadmill helped me to move faster.”

Kathy is continuing to use the exercise skills and eating habits that the students taught her in the program.

“I learned to eat less and to eat different kinds of food. I ate more fruits and vegetables and cut out some snack foods. I lost about eight pounds. I am still exercising and following a similar eating plan even though the program is over. I wanted to keep up with the progress.

“I have a stationary bike and exercise tapes at home. I exercise every evening after dinner, so even though I’m not getting out of the house and meeting people like I did with the program, I’m still sticking with it.”

Joe has notice an improvement in Kathy’s range of motion since Get FIT. “The exercises helped her to build muscle while losing weight,” Joe said. “She is on a better food regimen now. She even turned down French fries recently.”

Joe also participated to lose weight and build muscle strength. “I learned something new with each trainer and thought they were all very good,” said Joe. “In the spring, we had a separate nutrition course with a nutritionist. They taught us

about food choices in general. I had to cut out a few things, but they said I had one of the healthiest food profiles. My older daughter, Jennifer, is into healthy foods, so I try to eat healthily and drink a lot of water.”

“The trainers gave me core exercises to do, such as stretching exercises and cardio exercises. It helped me to gain a lot of muscle strength and energy and it helped my abs a lot. I liked all the exercises. I lost about eight pounds. I still do some of the exercises at home with barbells, plus I do sit-ups.”

Since participating in Get FIT, Kathy and her father served on a panel at a statewide Get FIT workshop sponsored by the New Jersey Commission on Recreation for People with Disabilities.

“We shared our experiences and got the participants involved in doing some of the exercises,” said Joe.

As a result of a newfound self-assurance that came with working out and working on her health, Kathy has become involved with the NJCDD’s Youth Leadership Program.

“We meet once a month,” said Kathy. “We talk about laws that help people with disabilities, and I find out about new things.

“I didn’t know about the bullying law and the R word law. The bullying law prevents bullies from picking on kids with disabilities. And the R word campaign is about using respectful language.”

Kathy has experienced both. In middle school other students wrote the words “crippled” and “retarded” on her locker.

“I went to the vice principal and they had to guard my locker. They suspended the kids, but the kids never apologized. It finally stopped at the end of the school year and the next year it was okay. That’s one reason I want to help with this bullying law. I’m running for Sergeant at Arms.” **P&F**