

health

WORKING OUT FOR

North Bellmore gym is one-of-a-kind in focusing on fitness for the developmentally disabled

mind & body

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

As the saying goes, there's always hope. But for several hundred developmentally disabled Long Island residents seeking to get the benefits of regular physical activity, there's Hope Fitness.

This North Bellmore gym is believed to be one of the country's only commercial fitness facility that focuses on this group, one that largely has been overlooked in the public health initiatives to get more Americans moving.

Hope Fitness opened its doors in December 2006. The owner, Harvey Greenberg of East Meadow, is a longtime Special Olympics coach and the father of a developmentally disabled son. As someone with personal and professional experience in this world, he knew that regular exercise was absent in the lives of people with these kinds of disabilities. "We're spoiled," says Greenberg, 45. "We can get up and go for a walk or go to the gym if we want to. They can't."

Over the years, Greenberg had watched developmentally disabled people he knew grow more and more sedentary and gain more and more weight. "It's a huge problem," he says. "Food is the biggest thing in the lives of many of these people." He decided to do something. A couple of years ago, he earned a certification

in fitness from the American Council on Exercise and began offering his services as a visiting trainer to local group homes and apartments. He would go to these living places and help the residents through basic exercises using whatever equipment he could carry.

Gyms weren't receptive

But there were limits to what he could do. He sought a way to get his clients out of their homes and into a gym. "I went out to several large gyms and pitched it to them," he says. "I said, 'We have potentially hundreds of clients here. Give us an hour a week, a Sunday at 6 p.m. when no one else is in the gym, if you want.' They looked at me as if I had two heads."

Greenberg, who runs a home mortgage business, decided to open his own gym, a place where the developmentally disabled could come and get the personal assistance they required.

"He talked to me about it in the planning stages," says Barbara Bodner, a residential program manager for the Nassau County chapter of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children. "I said, 'It's a fantastic idea.' Harvey has a big heart, and he genuinely cares about these individuals." Still, opening a gym of any kind is a risky business proposition in today's economic climate. "There was no model or business plan to follow for a gym like this," Greenberg says.

"But I decided, I'm going to take my chances. It was one of those 'Build it and they will come' things."

He did — and they did. About 200 clients, from as far away as Holbrook and Sayville, now come regularly to train at the 1,100-square foot space on North Jerusalem Avenue. Their disabilities range from mild mental retardation to severe autism. Although some are brought in individually by family members, most are adults who come from group homes and are accompanied by their fellow residents and helpers.

At the gym, Greenberg and his staff of nine part-time trainers (all who have experience working with special-needs individuals) supervise a regimen that, depending on the person's physical capabilities, involves pedaling on a recumbent bike for about 20 minutes, followed by a group weight-training class using dumbbells or resistance bands, and then some stretching. It's a balanced workout: But will it have the same effect on disabled people as on the rest of gym-goers?

"The big thing to recognize is that, whatever their developmental level, their bodies are the same as yours and mine," says Maddy Mos, a registered nurse with the association.

"Muscle is muscle," agrees Kenneth Pitetti, PhD, a specialist in exercise and disabilities at Wichita State University in Kansas. "Their reaction to exercise and training is no

different than any other person. If they exercise, they get the same benefits. But they seldom are given the opportunity."

According to the Boston-based International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, about 9 percent of the nation's health clubs offers some form of programming for people with various kinds of handicaps. There also are exercise programs for the developmentally disabled that are affiliated with hospitals and university medical centers and a few YMCAs around the country. But as far as anyone can tell, no commercial gym outside of Hope Fitness serves these individuals. Though he has plenty of clients, Greenberg says, it's not an easy market to serve and stay solvent. Greenberg says that many of the government agen-

cies that provide assistance to the developmentally disabled don't recognize exercise as an "essential" part of people's treatment.

What is important?
"That doesn't surprise me," Pitetti says. "These agencies don't see the importance of it." At least one large local organization has embraced the concept. "You and your organization have done more to improve the lives and health of people with intellectual disabilities than any single organization that I have encountered in over 10 years in the field of disabilities," nurse Nicole Uterano, a residential supervisor with the Nassau Association for the Help of Retarded Children, wrote in a testimonial letter that Greenberg prominently displays. Mos, one of her colleagues, is equally im-



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / THOMAS A. FERRARA

Above, trainer Rena End, right, leads a class at Hope Fitness; below, Joey Clurfeld, left, and others use elastic ropes.



WHAT YOU'LL FIND AT HOPE FITNESS

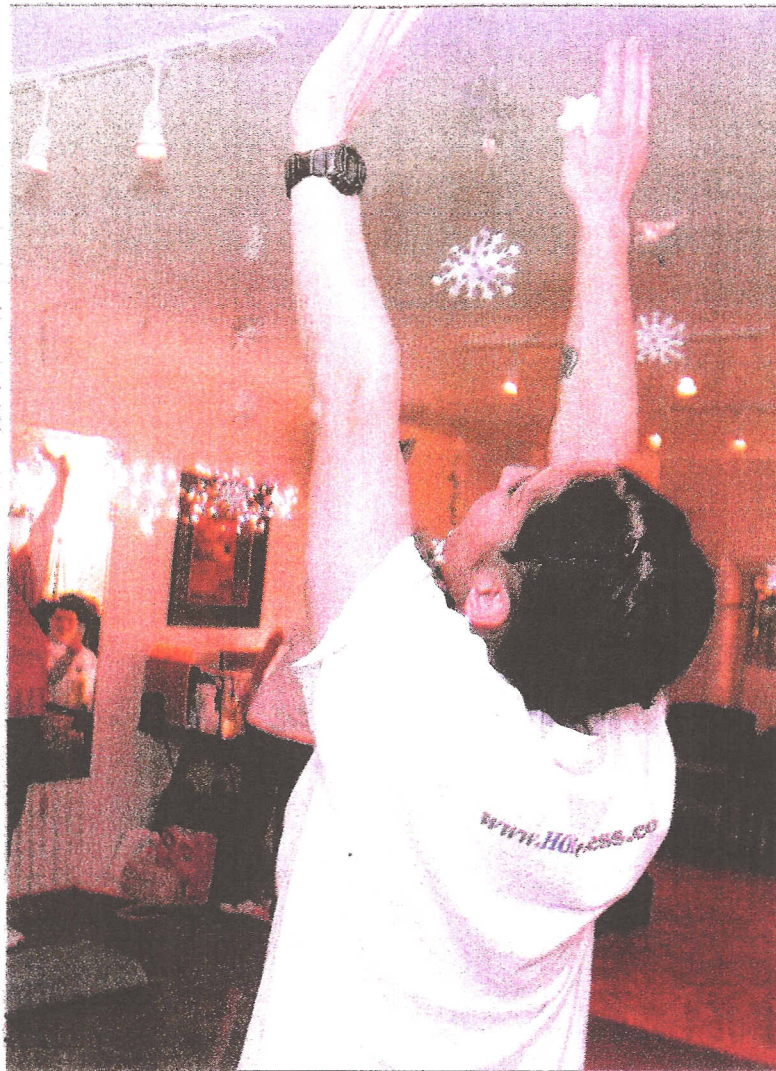
Fees at Hope Fitness are assessed on a pay-as-you-go basis: Special-needs individuals are charged \$10 per one-hour group workout; \$40 for one-on-one 60-minute training sessions. One-on-one training also is available to the

public at \$50 per hour. There also are discounts for families and staff of group home facilities.

According to Hope Fitness founder Harvey Greenberg, the developmentally disabled clients of Hope Fitness pay for their own sessions. The money comes

from family trust funds, Social Security, or, for those who are able to hold jobs, from their own income.

The club is at 2750 N. Jerusalem Rd. in North Bellmore. For more information, call 877-396-4673 (HOPE) or visit Hopefitness.com.



Below right, Tim Flynn, center, helps client Eric Forman exercise with hand weights, while, at left, stationary bikers put on the miles.



pressed. "I wish there were another five of these on Long Island," she says.

What about the individuals that Hope Fitness serves? Some are nonverbal and can't express their feelings, but many can and do so vociferously.

"I like to come here!" says Donald MacKenzie, a resident of a group home in East Meadow.

"The people are nice," says Eric David Forman, a resident at the same facility. "It's a fun place."

Hope Fitness is indeed a positive place — at least on a recent Wednesday evening, when these men and the residents of several other homes around Nassau were shuttling in and out for their one-hour workouts. There was much chatter and laughter, and, though trainers and aides were on hand to make sure their charges were engaged and involved, they didn't seem to need too much prodding.

"They like to participate just as you and I do," Pitetti says. Developmentally disabled individuals, he says, are also "aware of when they're being excluded,

or talked to in a demeaning way," another reason they feel comfortable, almost like family, at Hope Fitness.

The gym is a family business: Greenberg's developmentally disabled son, Corey, now 17, participates in the workouts and helps his father with some of the chores around the club.

Besides the social benefits, many of the clients at Hope Fitness have made tangible progress in other important ways.

Kathy Loquercio is independent enough to take a bus every morning from her Mineola home to her job as a cashier at a local supermarket; she also cooks for herself. But like many, Loquercio, 41, has battled weight gain for years. She tried Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers, without success, and once even joined a regular health club, but felt uncomfortable and out of place. Since she started working out eight months ago at Hope, things have changed. She has lost 30 pounds and feels great.

"I was waiting a long time for something like this," she says.