

Sections



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A gym for those with autism

Amanda Cuda Published 9:48 am, Saturday, February 1, 2014

Gyms are a dime a dozen in this appearance-obsessed world, where people regularly make and break commitments to exercise and getting into better shape. Less common are fitness centers geared toward a specific population -- one for whom working out yields both physical and emotional benefits.

This spring, Orange residents Adam and **Dedra Leapley** plan to open the **Autism Spectrum Disorder Fitness Center** on Racebrook Road in their town.

The couple's son, whose age and name they wouldn't give, is on the autism disorder spectrum -- a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral issues. Last year, the Leapleys' son began working out with a personal trainer, which Adam Leapley said had dramatic results.

More Information

Fundraiser

There will be a Wine & Craft Beer Tasting Fundraiser on Saturday at 7 p.m. at St. Barbara's Church, 480 Racebrook Road. Pam Ventola and Fred R. Volkmar, of the Yale University Child Study Center, will speak, and TV and radio personality Tony Terzi will be master of ceremonies.

Tickets are \$100 per person and must be purchased in advance. Tickets can be purchased online at

https://www.paypal.com/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_s-xclick&hosted_button_id=XEFY94Q9GY7C2.

"It helped immensely," said Leapley, a wealth manager who didn't want the name of his employer used. "I saw such a difference."

So did **Chris Abildgaard**, director of the **Social Learning Center** in Wallingford, who has worked with the Leapley family for years. "It was really fascinating, the impact it had on his self-esteem and even his social skills," Abildgaard said.

Given how much exercise had done for the Leapleys' son, they decided to build a gym specifically for adults and children

on the spectrum. The Leapleys are funding the project themselves and are developing the center with the help of an advisory board of experts, including Abildgaard.

To his knowledge, Abildgaard said the **ASD Fitness Center** will be one of the few

facilities of its kind.

"It's pretty unique," he said, adding that it can be difficult to get people with ASD to exercise. "Most individuals on the autism spectrum don't like to do a lot of physical activity."

ASD symptoms range from the relatively mild to severe, including language limits, social disengagement and sensitivity to stimuli, such as light and sound. About 1 in 88 children has been identified with an autism spectrum disorder, according to estimates from the federal **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's** Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network.

But research has shown that physical activity can be beneficial for people on the spectrum. A 2010 study by the **University of California** looked at 64 people with ASD from 18 earlier studies and found that, after exercising, the participants tended to be less aggressive, more focused and less inclined to inappropriate behavior.

Despite these benefits, the need for fitness programs for those on the autism spectrum is often overlooked because there are more pressing needs for this population, such as access to services, said **Pam Ventola**, assistant professor at the **Yale University Child Study Center**.

"There are just so many needs for individuals on the spectrum, fitness kind of falls off people's radar," said Ventola, who is also on the fitness center advisory board.

Like Abildgaard, Ventola didn't know of any other gyms just for people with ASD, and she said they're badly needed.

"A traditional fitness center can be overwhelming with the noise and the crowds and the social issues," she said.

Leapley said he is building ASD Fitness Center to take into account the needs and sensitivities of those on the spectrum.

"It's not going to be a typical gym," he said. "We had to worry about lighting and flooring and echoing in the room because of any sensitivity issues."

Gym members would largely work with personal trainers who will have a background in special education.

"All trainers are special education first, trainers second," Leapley said.

Though he would not give specific numbers, Leapley said membership costs will be similar to those one would pay to work out with a personal trainer at a regular gym. However, he said, some membership scholarships will be available.

With the project just months away from opening, Leapley said he's looking forward to giving families in the region access to the same kind of progress that was so important to his son.

"I think we can really help a lot of people," he said.

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