

TOUGH GLOVE

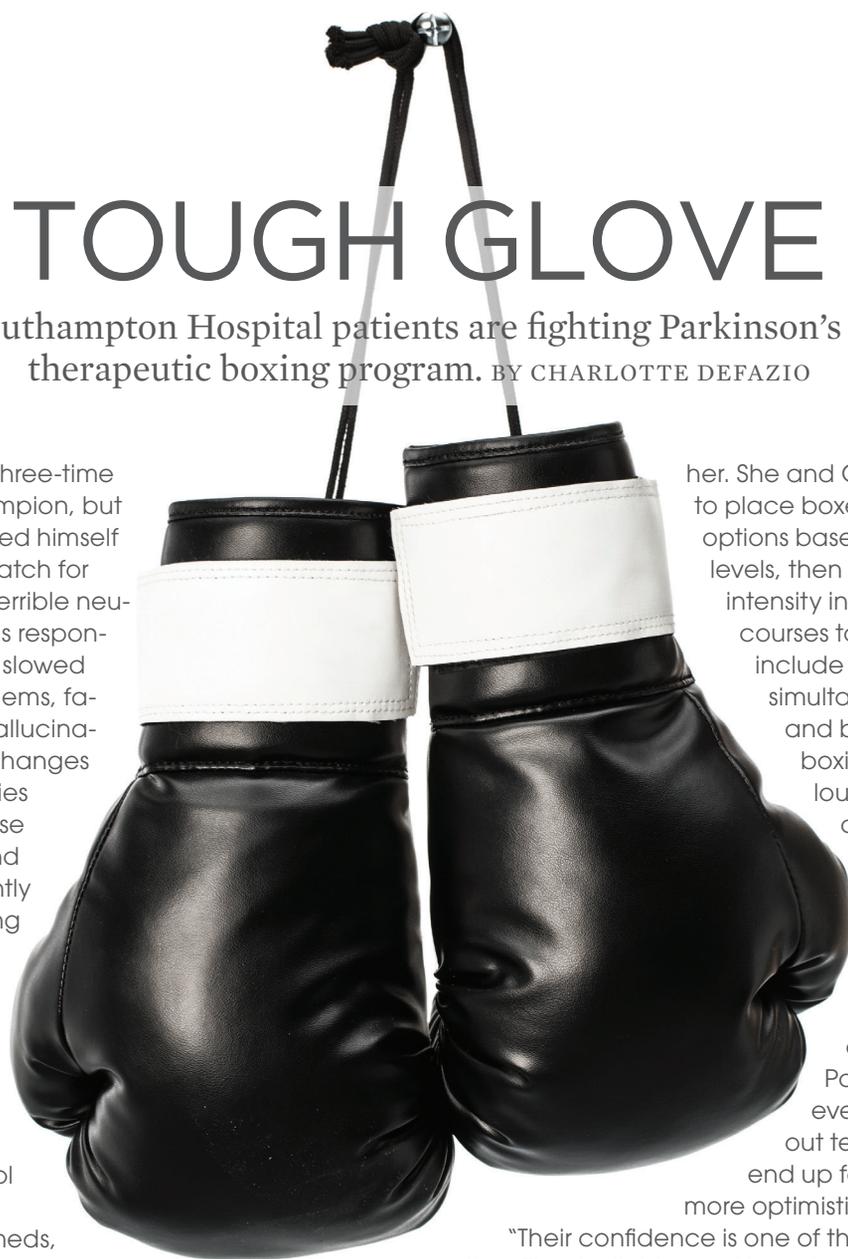
Stony Brook Southampton Hospital patients are fighting Parkinson's Disease with a therapeutic boxing program. BY CHARLOTTE DEFAZIO

Muhammad Ali was the three-time World Heavyweight Champion, but even the man who dubbed himself "The Greatest" was no match for Parkinson's disease. This terrible neurodegenerative disorder is responsible for tremors, stiffness, slowed movement, speech problems, facial masking, dizziness, hallucinations, depression, vision changes and more. Other celebrities who suffer from the disease include Michael J. Fox and Neil Diamond, who recently announced he was retiring from touring after he was diagnosed. Symptoms generally develop slowly over years, but it's the 14th leading cause of death in the United States, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Though prescriptions meds, medical marijuana and surgery can improve symptoms, there's no cure. But research has shown that exercise can help patients maintain mobility and balance, and significantly improve their quality of life. So Stony Brook Southampton Hospital's Center for Parkinson's Disease has developed a multifaceted wellness program that includes an array of classes in yoga, tai chi, dance and painting, as well as a therapeutic chorus. "I started this because there were no resources for people with Parkinson's Disease," explains Sarah Cohen, PT, DPT, a physical therapist and the Center's program manager.

She teamed up with Michelle Del Giorno, founder of the Epic Martial Arts studio in Sag Harbor, to start the Rock Steady Boxing affiliate program. Rocky Steady Boxing is a national organization that trains instructors to teach non-contact boxing classes specifically geared to Parkinson's patients. "It really is, as far as I know, the first of its kind out here," says Cohen.

Sensei (a coach or teacher in martial arts) Del Giorno opened her Sag Harbor studio eight years ago, but the Rock Steady Boxing program is a whole new endeavor for



her. She and Cohen work together to place boxers in one of two class options based on their functional levels, then Del Giorno tailors high intensity interval training (HIIT) courses to each group. Classes include a series of moves that simultaneously work the mind and body, from shadow-boxing and counting out loud to working hand-eye coordination on a speed bag and passing a weighted ball.

Del Giorno acknowledges that boxing may sound like a counterintuitive choice as therapy for Parkinson's patients. But even if participants start out tentative or fearful, they end up feeling stronger and more optimistic, Del Giorno says.

"Their confidence is one of the underlying things I notice. They're lighter and happier. They have this camaraderie within the group. Everyone is working, sweating—we laugh and cry. There's all types of emotions we see, plus there's this bonding in the group."

Cohen agrees, claiming that "one of the biggest gifts of the program is that it has created the most incredible community," which is so important in countering the apathy, depression and social withdrawal that some people with Parkinson's experience.

The class began in September with a group of five boxers and has grown to host almost forty in Sag Harbor, with the addition of an affiliate (as of January) in Hampton Bays. Both programs are sponsored by the hospital.

And every yell, every punching combination and every glove hitting a bag is a symbol of someone battling this insidious disease, refusing to give up the fight. Muhammad Ali would definitely approve.

For more information, contact: Stony Brook Southampton Hospital, southampton.stonybrookmedicine.edu; Epic Martial Arts, sagharborkarate.com; or Rock Steady Boxing, sagharbor.rsbaaffiliate.com. 🌸

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