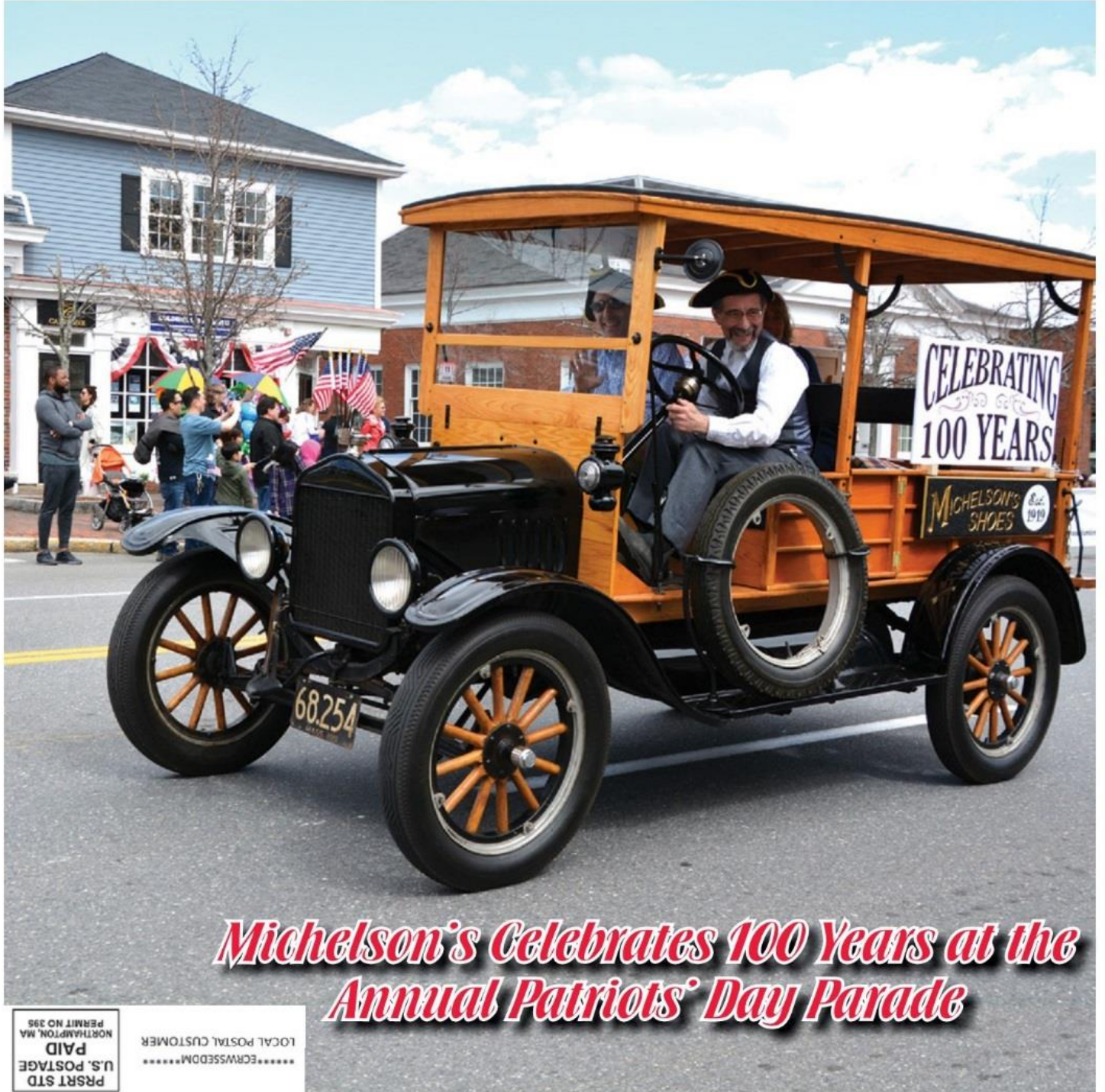


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# Lexington's *Colonial Times* Magazine

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# Hope, Help and Healing for Brain Injury Survivors



With treadmills, stationary bikes, weights, and benches, the Wellness Center looks like any other gym. But it's fully wheelchair accessible, and the equipment is adapted for use by people with some level of disability. The treadmills have harnesses to stabilize people with limited balance, and the exercise bikes have fittings that enable users with reduced strength in their hands to get a full workout. Above Beatriz Dominguez working with Christian Fabrizio.

## New Brain Injury Wellness Center at Douglas House to expand life-enhancing program

By Jane Whitehead

On a raw Thursday afternoon in early April, an adaptive exercise class is in full swing in the Wellness Center on the lower level of Douglas House, a short walk from Lexington center.

Lexington resident Lee Jeffers Brami has a yellow resistance band looped round her ankles as student intern Grace Thomas shows her a side-step exercise to build leg muscle strength and hip mobility. Fitness trainer Christian Fabrizio prompts retired real-estate developer Frank Carney to walk in a straight line while swinging a heavy exercise ball from hand to hand.

Carney was diagnosed with Parkinson's four years ago, and is working to improve balance and strength. "A program like this is good for him – they give him some challenge, some variety," says his wife Pat, who is observing the class.

Well-known in town as home to survivors of traumatic brain injury, Douglas House is one of four residential communities managed by Supportive Living, Inc. (SLI). This non-profit organization was founded in 1991 to provide affordable housing, and health and wellness programs, to people living with brain injury. Since 2013, SLI's wellness program has been open both to residents and members of the wider community

affected by stroke, brain injury or other neurological issues.

### Fitness for All

With treadmills, stationary bikes, weights, and benches, the Wellness Center looks like any other gym. But it's fully wheelchair accessible, and as Fabrizio explains, the equipment is adapted for use by people with some level of disability. The treadmills have harnesses to stabilize people with limited balance, and the exercise bikes have fittings that enable users with reduced strength in their hands to get a full workout.

Every client works one-on-one with a personal trainer. "I really love that I have my own intern, or trainer, who's advising me," says Jeffers Brami, who has a tremor in her head and neck. "It's invaluable to know that I'm doing an exercise the right way," she says.



Russ Brami works out with Rose who is an intern from Brandeis.

### From Research Project to Community Resource

As SLI president Peter Noonan explains, The Wellness Program started in 2013 as a small exercise research project with eight participants, all from Douglas



House and SLI's three other communities in Woburn, North Reading and Rockport. The study showed many benefits from the intensive 6-week exercise program, including improved strength and balance.

The next step was to open the program to people from the wider community affected by stroke, brain injury or other neurological disorders. When long-time Lexington resident and former realtor Beatriz Dominguez had a stroke in 2004, she initially lost her ability to speak in any of the three languages in which she had been fluent.

The loss of her identity as an outgoing, independent professional was hard to bear, says her husband Robert Mensah, who gave up his work as a scientist to care for his wife full time. Through a friend, he discovered Douglas House, and two and a half years ago started bringing Dominguez to exercise classes.

Thanks to the encouragement of the trainers and interns, and the supportive social atmosphere in the Wellness Center, "this place has been able to motivate her," says Mensah. Now, Dominguez says, she's willing to do "anything that will make me better." She's pleased to be one of the participants in a joint study by SLI and Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital on the effects of exercise on reducing cognitive decline in people who have suffered strokes.

While adaptive exercise classes are the core of the Wellness Program, other classes have been added to offer different kinds of stimulation. These include Expressive Art, Boxing for Balance, Interactive Drumming, Healthy Cooking, Horticulture, and Yoga.



SLI's Wellness program attracts interns from local colleges and the residents love interacting with the students. Above Wellness Center Manager Harrison Carmichael works with participant George.

The gardening program started six years ago, with one big plant pot on the deck at Douglas House, says horticulture program manager Leslie Doig, herself a survivor of a traumatic brain injury sustained in a car accident. Now, there are twelve wheelchair accessible

*The Wellness Program will soon be open to more people in the wider community. The renovation of a two-story 19th century building on the Douglas House site on Oakland Street will provide more capacity for the Wellness Program with double the capacity of the existing space. The project will be completed by the end of summer, with the building open for use by September 2019.*



PHOTOS BY JIM SHAW

raised beds, with strawberry runners and perennial herbs already showing green shoots. On a grow-light shelf in the corner of the common room, pots of vegetable seedlings wait to be planted out. "We connect what we're growing with the menu, and the residents love to pick their own home grown tomatoes and radishes," says Doig.

### A New Space for Growth

The Wellness Program will soon be open to more people in the wider community, thanks to the renovation of a two-story 19th century building on the Douglas House site on Oakland Street. The main level will house a new Wellness Center with double the capacity of the existing space, says Noonan. After a 60-day delay in the removal of a gas line from the historic property, the current timeline is for the work to be completed by the end of summer, with the building open for use by September 2019.

A capital campaign to fund the building's renovation and the expansion of the Wellness Program has raised \$140,000 to date from local residents, businesses, foundations and organizations, says Development Director Deborah Rourke. (See sidebar.) On Monday, April 8, Town Meeting voted to approve SLI's request for a \$70,000 grant from Lexington's Community Preservation Committee (CPC) to fund structural safety features, in addition to a 2018 CPC grant of \$200,000, for the adaptive re-use of an historic structure.

*Continued on page*

## Brain Injury Wellness Center Capital Campaign Update

Overall Project Cost: \$510,000

Funds Raised To Date: \$410,000

SLI thanks Lexington neighbors and these businesses, organizations and committees for their generous support:

Battlegreen Run Foundation  
Cambridge Savings Bank  
Dana Home Foundation  
Indian Americans of Lexington  
Lexington Community Preservation Committee  
Lexington Lions Club  
Lexington Trustees of Public Trusts

To support the Wellness Center Capital Campaign and expanded wellness programming:

Please give online at [supportiveliving-inc.org](http://supportiveliving-inc.org) or make your check payable to Supportive Living, Inc. and mail to:

Supportive Living Inc.  
P.O. Box 265  
Lexington, MA 02420

For more information, please contact SLI's Development Director, Deb Rourke at: [drouрке@supportivelivinginc.org](mailto:drouрке@supportivelivinginc.org)



### Intern Impact

The Wellness Program depends on a large cast of dedicated professionals, volunteers, and student interns from local colleges. SLI's year-round internship program now attracts over 100 applicants a year, for around 45 places. "Getting kids in here, excited and happy to do the work, is a key piece in the success of the program," says Noonan. It's also essential to keeping class fees to an affordable \$10 per hour.

Intern Stephanie Esker is a senior at UMass Lowell, studying exercise physiology, and planning to train as a physical therapist. In two months at Douglas House, she says, she's seen how fitness training "brightens everyone's day and brings up their spirits." She's also come to appreciate the uniqueness of every person she works with. "They're not just a textbook picture," she says. "They have things they're very interested in – they teach me stuff."

"The social aspect is very important," says intern Jess Fox. She finds her clients very engaged. "They love the interaction with the interns, and they want to get to know us," says Fox, a psychology major at Gordon College.

"The interns are great," says Douglas House resident Don Rondeau, who was partially paralyzed by a severe stroke at age 49, and one of the first to benefit from the adaptive exercise program.

He used a wheelchair when he first moved to Lexington four years ago, and now walks up and down stairs unaided. "The exercise program is a great, great thing," he says, and he enjoys meeting each new rotation of interns, finding out where they come from, where they go to school, what they like to eat, and

having a laugh together.

### Common Ground

"There's a lot of stigma and fear that people have about people with disabilities," says Brenda Prusak, a yoga teacher who has run classes at the Wellness Center for five years. "We want to be inclusive, but we're all a little uncertain. Should we go up and say hello to someone in a wheelchair?"

Prusak recalls a meeting with Douglas House residents, when someone asked, "What would you like people to do, when you're out and about in town?" "They said, we'd just like them to say hello!" And many people do. "The community has been wonderful to us," says Dennis Hogle. When he's in Lexington center in his wheelchair, he says, "If I'm a hundred feet from a door, someone will open it for me."

"With the Wellness Center, we're really enhancing our residents' quality of life," says Douglas House program director Cindy Janik, who has worked in the field of brain injury rehabilitation since 1985. She sees the expansion of the Wellness Program as a win-win for the residents and community members, who will have many more opportunities to get to know each other.

"There's so much to learn from our residents – the perseverance, the



SLI president Peter Noonan with Development Director Deborah Rourke



Above: Brenda Prusak, a yoga teacher who has run classes at the Wellness Center for five years with Lee Brami.

### Calling painters and gardeners!

Once construction is completed on the new Brain Injury Wellness Center, SLI will be looking for volunteers to put the finishing touches to the refurbished building. Tasks will include painting and landscaping – a great opportunity for organizations looking for community service projects!

The Horticulture Program is also looking for volunteers, both to work with residents and for general landscaping maintenance.

To find out about volunteer opportunities, please contact SLI's Development Director, Deb Rourke at: [drouрке@supportivelivinginc.org](mailto:drouрке@supportivelivinginc.org)

