

SLI Connection



Supportive Living Inc. | Brain Injury Programs | Vol 76 / Fall 2020

WELCOME BACK – WE MISSED YOU!

Living in Lexington, Russ and Lee were excited to learn about the SLI Neuro-Wellness Center in 2017. Russ was recently diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and Lee suffers from Essential Tremor. Except for a six-month Covid-forced hiatus in 2020, they have been faithful twice a week participants in SLI's Neuro-Fit Assisted Exercise classes for individuals with brain injury and other neurological disorders.

They have participated in exercise and yoga classes, but Lee's favorite is Boxing for Balance, Core and More. "It helps with balance, arm and core strength and taking out your frustrations. I just feel better mentally after a session." And the science backs Lee up. Exercise causes the body to release chemicals that boost your sense of well-being and suppress hormones that cause stress and anxiety. Stress can lead to and aggravate symptoms of conditions like Essential Tremor.

Russ always starts his exercise routine on the bicycle to warm up, then focuses on strength and balance. "I was in the Army and developed an aversion to exercise the way they pushed it. Besides walking, this is the only exercise I get. We make attending these

classes a priority. This exercise is serious, but meaningful and not oppressive."

Russ and Lee had to stop attending classes when SLI closed in the spring due to Covid-19. "But we couldn't wait to get back," says Lee. "Classes were cancelled March through September, and it was hard. Kara (SLI manager), was sending helpful exercise videos each month, and we tried some Zoom-based sessions, but it's just not the same." Lee credits the interns for making the classes enjoyable and productive. "We just can't say enough good things about

this program. We have worked with many different interns in the classes and they're all great. It's so different having someone there in person encouraging and training you. It is just so great to be back".

"We make attending these classes a priority. This exercise is serious, but meaningful and not oppressive."

*Below:
Russ, Coach Liz, and Lee in action*



LIVE AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE

FALL UPDATE

Peter J. Noonan, President/CEO

As we wind down the “Year of Covid” we decided to feature positive stories and updates to keep an upbeat mood as we plan for 2021. It is great to welcome people back to our Neuro-Fit classes and learn about our resilient brains. You will see how our residential programs have been guided safely through the year and get a glimpse of life from a former intern. This has been a challenging year, but we are finishing it with an optimistic attitude and deep gratitude for those who helped us through. Best wishes for a healthy and happy holiday season and New Year.



HEALING THE BRAIN

Dr. Tim Kelliher,
Medical Director,
SLI Neuro-Wellness

Neural plasticity is the brain’s ability to reorganize in a way that allows it to adapt to the environment as needed. Another term for this is learning. By learning we are actually rewiring the brain. This ability begins to decline around our 20’s but really persists for our whole life. This reorganization occurs by several means. Nerves, or neurons, can grow and reach out to connect to other nerves via synapses or they can multiply in number, a term called proliferation. They can also change their function, a term we call differentiation.

This whole process of plasticity is regulated by chemicals called growth factors. These growth factors control neuron survival, differentiation, proliferation and influence synaptic function. It’s only been a decade or so that we have really begun to understand how

they influence the brain’s plasticity and as research progresses there is high hope that we will be able to stimulate and modulate this process.

Plasticity cannot occur without an external force to drive the process and guide the rewiring. One of the best stimulants for this process is exercise. Exercise not only keeps the body healthy and fit, but evidence continues to mount that cognitive health relies on exercise as much if not more than mental stimulation. Hitting the gym and being social seems to provide more protection from cognitive decline than sitting at home and doing crossword puzzles. Exercise makes people feel good by releasing chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins also improve concentration, stimulate neuron growth, increase synaptic connections and help prevent age related decline and cell death. That runner’s high is so much more than just a good feeling.

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Understanding this strong mind body connection led us to create the SLI Neuro-Wellness Program, which provides assisted exercise and other mind-wellness activities. After brain injury, we want to maximize plasticity in hopes of returning and improving brain function. Studies show again and again that improvement in function occurs with exercise programs but as soon as the programs end, discontinuing the driving force of plasticity, there is a gradual loss of the functions gained. This is why the SLI Brain Injury Wellness Center provides life-long fitness for adults with brain injury and other neurological disorders. We hope to sustain these improvements throughout life. As research progresses and growth factors become more clinically useful, I believe the importance of programs such as this one will increase. They will become the force that drives enhanced neural plasticity and betters the life of those with neurological trauma or disease.

LIVE AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE

RESIDENTIAL PROGRAM UPDATE

Heather Dely, Director, Northeast Brain Injury Services, Advocates

What a whirlwind the past 9 months have been! Days seem to melt into the next, summer went by in a blink, and I am pretty sure that we all actually aged at least 3 years. SLI's Residential Brain Injury Program, supported by Advocates, has been incredibly lucky through the diligence of our staff. We have had only two positive coronavirus tests for individuals throughout this time, (please knock on wood). Once faced with such an incredible task as managing in a pandemic-filled world, we have seen such amazing response from our communities, families, and staff. The Town of Rockport hand delivered a touch-free thermometer to Old Farm. Warren House families got right to their sewing machines and made masks for all residents and staff. Douglas House families are regularly ordering meals for our staff to show appreciation. McLaughlin House staff have seamlessly navigated all protocols and gone above and beyond to engage the residents through quarantine. They promoted strengthening and weight loss in the absence of specialized therapies! Program Directors have been on call 24/7 through this whole time and have made immediate response to issues – no matter what time of day, or night.



A main theme that we have seen through everything is how fortunate we are! Residents and their closest relationships have become our family. We have trusted and respected each other through times of fear and uncertainty. We have navigated new state expectations and protocols as best we can. We are so thankful for our sister agency SLI who has come through with supplies we needed or found ways to thank our staff! We are grateful to be partners in care and hope for the best, most unusual, holiday season!

WHERE ARE THEY NOW? - *Catching up with intern alumna, Rachel G.*

Rachel was pursuing a double undergraduate degree in psychology and public health at the University of Rochester when she enrolled in the SLI Neuro-wellness summer intern program in 2018. She knew she wanted to pursue a career in occupational therapy and thought an internship of 'hands-on' training would help broaden her experience.



Rachel & SLI resident at Red Sox

However, she found few occupational therapy internships available to undergraduates. "There are programs for graduate students, but few for undergraduates." While she had little exposure to individuals with brain injury, she gave the SLI internship program a try. Not sure what she was getting into, she loved the internship program from the start - the hands-on experience, the psychological aspects, the exercise programs, the chance to bond with program participants. "I was hooked on working in brain injury

after my internship at SLI." At the end of her SLI internship Rachel returned to school, targeting graduation in May 2020. "I planned on taking a year off after my undergraduate work, then going to graduate school to pursue an Occupational Therapy Doctorate."

In her gap year Rachel wanted to acquire more hands-on experience and landed a position with Advocates

as a Brain Injury Specialist in the day-and-community services programs. Continuing with her long-term plan, Rachel has now been accepted to graduate school and plans to start in the Summer or Fall of 2021. In the meantime, she wants to expand her experience and is embarking on a new position working in occupational therapy with children. She remains an SLI supporter, having exceeded her fundraising goal as a member of SLI Team Neurons in the 2020 Genesis Battlegreen Run.

Supportive Living, Inc. is in our final fundraising push of the year with our Annual Appeal.

To donate please use the enclosed envelope, or go to www.supportivelivinginc.org/how-to-help/



Thank you.



Wishing you a safe, healthy and happy holiday season and New Year!



Supportive Living, Inc. is a nonprofit organization with a mission to raise the quality of life for brain injury survivors by providing appropriate affordable housing, neuro-wellness programs, collaborative research and education. 781-937-3199 | www.supportivelivinginc.org

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