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She's 92 and 'she packs one hell of a punch'

ROBERT WILLIAMS Telegraph-Journal

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Rita Hale takes a break as the instructors move their way down the punching line at KV Golden Gloves Boxing.

Photo: Robert Williams/ Telegraph-Journal

QUISPAMSIS • The wheels of the walker come to a stop as a timeworn hand reaches out and grabs the rope of the boxing ring.

"I've seen this before," the man says, pausing for a moment as he looks down at the mat. A smile runs over his face when a nursing home helper says from behind him, "that's right, you used to be a boxer."

And for about an hour every week, a group from Kings Way LifeCare Alliance turn back the clocks and step into the ring at KV Golden Gloves Boxing in Quispamsis.

The idea started when Megan O'Hara, the community development coordinator with Kingsway, started seeing videos online about the positive impact boxing can have with seniors. She's been a member at the Quispamsis boxing gym for about a year, and approached owner Tim Hayes about whether he'd be interested in having the residents of Kings Way Care Centre and Kennebec Manor come try it out.

After some planning and logistics work, the first session was held in April. It was only supposed to be 20 minutes - it lasted over an hour and a half.

"We really thought this was going to be a one-time thing," said Hayes. "Now we're onto our eighth session, and it's growing."

Hayes worked with a physical therapist to design a warm-up routine that would be both safe and strenuous for the group. Then, it's gloves on and pads out.

"It's not about teaching them technique," said Hayes. "We just let them go."

Volunteers from the gym lead the practice, mixing in with workers from the homes who grab the pads and make the rounds around the room. There's a range in ability of the residents. Some are in their 90s, others have dementia and some have Parkinson's disease.

They start off in chairs sitting in the shape of a horse shoe, but as the practice progresses, those who are willing head to the heavy bags.

The fun begins

For the "troublemakers," who go by the name Rita Hale and Gord Hills, it's time for a little one-on-one.

"She packs one hell of a punch," Hills says with a wink, before taking his glove off and throwing it at Hale from his electric wheelchair. Not to be outdone, Hale throws hers back. The instructors come over and put them back on and Hale unloads a fury of punches as Hills eggs her on.

"Those two are always like that," says Hayes.

Hills has multiple sclerosis and has been in a wheelchair for close to 20 years. He said boxing gives him the ability to really "build up a sweat." Even if it's "just because he's full of bologna," Hale chimes in.

She is a 92-year-old retired science teacher from Simonds High School and has some of the quickest jabs in the group.

"You gotta be doing something, even if you're old," she said. "If not you lose what you do have."

And that means different things for different people.

When it comes to Kaylyn Mawhinney, it's about holding on to the good days when her father, Wes, still remembers her.

He has dementia, and Kaylyn asked Hayes if she could help with the class to spend more time with him. She also trains at the gym, as does her son, Kamden.

"Today was a good day," she said as she watches Hayes teach Wes how to use a punching bag. "It's something that I love, and it's great to see him enjoy it, too."

Program taking off

Social media posts about the classes have garnered mass praise, and Hayes said he's considering expanding the program.

He's already been contacted by two other nursing homes eager to bring in their residents.

O'Hara says that for the men, it brings them back to a time where boxing would have been extremely popular, especially in the 1940s and 50s. But the women have been just as eager, she said, and no one takes themselves too seriously.

The session ends with an impromptu dance party before they start filing back into the bus to grab a much-needed lunch.

"Laughter is the best medicine," said O'Hara. "And we do a lot of laughing while we're here."

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