

People with intellectual disabilities relishing new fitness initiative

Ailín Quinlan

Programme sees trainee fitness instructors help St Michael's House service-users in the gym

Until recently, Mary Lynch had to take her 26-year-old son Jonathan for a gruelling two-hour power walk around their Donaghmede neighbourhood every single evening.

Jonathan is a powerhouse of energy, but lacks concentration, and needs to be kept constantly occupied. "Every evening we'd take him out for at least two hours of power walking – otherwise we wouldn't get any sleep that night because he'd be up, and he'd disturb everyone," recalls Mary.

However, under a new programme at St Michael's House – an organisation based in Dublin 9 which provides a comprehensive range of services and supports to men, women, and children with intellectual disabilities – service users get regular one-on-one supervised training from trainee fitness instructors in a gym.

It has meant those exhausting power walks are no longer a mandatory daily oc-

currence.

"Jonathan goes to the gym once or twice a week and the first thing we noticed was that the day he went to the gym, he'd be in much better form," Mary explains. "There'd be a huge improvement in his mood. That night he'd be tired, and there would be no need for the power walk that day – or the following day."

Jonathan adds: "My favourite exercises are the rope ladder and the obstacle course. They're great fun and they make me feel really happy. I feel tired after doing them, but it's a good tiredness. I really enjoy boxing as well."

Jonathan is just one of the service-users to benefit from the training programme which came about thanks to the brainwave of Ray Bardin, a community care support worker with the organisation.

As part of his work with St Michael's House, Bardin, who is also a certified Taekwondo instructor, assisted service users to

attend their local gyms.

Novel proposal

Bardin says he became concerned when he noticed that the gymgoers were not using the gym equipment correctly, and were therefore not really benefiting from their workouts. There were also potential safety risks associated with the incorrect use of fitness machines. He felt, he says, that the gym visits were a “box-ticking” exercise, because the service users lacked knowledge about how to train correctly.

In the winter of 2017, Bardin contacted Keith Martin who runs Fit-Cert Ireland, which provides training for people who want to become gym instructors. Bardin had a novel proposal for Martin: he suggested the student instructors might like to avail of the opportunity to upskill further through working with people of intellectual disability.

Meanwhile, the benefit for the service users

at St Michael's House, Bardin envisaged, would be learning how to use the gym equipment correctly and safely so that they could benefit from their visits.

Martin and his students agreed to provide training on a voluntary basis. Each of the trainee fitness instructors involved in the programme was required to reach a certain level of training before working with the service users. A number of trial sessions took place in late 2017 and early 2018.

They were so successful, Bardin recalls, that the first course for St Michael's House service users took place in the spring of 2018 at Parnell's GAA Club gym in Coolock. The course runs one day a week for a month with a group of between 10 and 15 service users

working one on one with the student instructors, steadily gaining the confidence to train independently. That first course at the gym was followed by a second in the summer/autumn of last year. The next one begins this April.

Each service-user receives a bespoke training programme, tailored to his or her specific fitness goals, for example, cardio fitness, building muscle or weight loss. The men and women, who range in age from people in their early 20s to their 40s, can also avail of an ongoing support service where, on the completion of their programme they can continue to meet with a trainer for further guidance and assistance in working towards their individual goals.

“Participating in the course means that a service user can go to the gym and use machines safely and correctly,” explains Bardin who adds that it is expected that courses will take place up to three times a year.

Workout sessions

On top of the obvious benefits in terms of fitness, participating in the one-to-one sessions has also improved the attitude of service-users to diet, says Bardin. “They are



more aware of what they eat, because their diet is a big part of their training. It's about getting people interested in their physical health and fitness – and physical fitness plays a big part in positive mental health.”

For Mary Lynch the “ biggest, most important thing for Jonathan is that there are lots of different kinds of exercise in his workout sessions. The staff engage really well with Jonathan. They get an awful lot out of him – they are brilliant.”

Robyn O'Shea (24), from Glasnevin, is another St Michael's House service user who benefited from the gym programme. “Robyn had a serious heart operation about six years ago,” explains her mother Noeleen. “After the operation her weight increased, which was not a good thing, as she had had stents inserted. We found that the regular gym sessions and emphasis on eating healthily kept her active and kept her weight down. Since she started the gym sessions and eating healthily she has lost three stone.”

Robyn says she loves “the treadmill and the rowing machine – they're my favourites. They make me feel happy and I am eating healthily too. I love getting fit”.





■ Jonathan Lynch, Donaghmede, and Robyn O'Shea at the gym. Left: Ray Bardin, community care support worker with St Michael's House. "It's about getting people interested in their physical health and fitness – and physical fitness plays a big part in positive mental health," he says. PHOTOGRAPHS: NICK BRADSHAW