

## **Local fitness trainer makes round to help disabled**

After physical therapy is over – or worse, when insurance stops paying for it – many people who struggle with a disability don't know where to turn for fitness and exercise.

People coping with new disabilities, perhaps as a result of a car accident, will often have to make new adjustments to their physical lives. Some adjustments might be as simple as re-learning to raise their arms high enough to reach a glass in the cabinet, while others have to address the trials that come along with losing the ability to walk.

Julie Edwards, a 24-year-old Royal Oak resident, went blind after suffering an optic nerve brain injury from a car accident in 2005. The hardest part for her, after dealing with the idea of not being able to see again, was getting around on her own.

In high school, Edwards played sports. After she graduated, she spent much of her time rollerblading, running and working out. Although she's come a long way since losing her sight, simple things most take for granted- like adjusting a fitness machine's weight at the gym or going to refill a water bottle at the fountain- are a challenge for her.

"It was learning how to do things without being able to see," she said. "I've always been really active, so with fitness, I was really worried."

Greg Kirk, a 31-year-old certified fitness therapist and owner of Fitness Training Unlimited in Macomb Township, has dedicated his time to helping people like Edwards. For the past few years, he's been making rounds at YMCAs and recreation centers throughout Metro Detroit, meeting with disabled people to assist them in their physical training.

For people like Edwards, who relies on touch alone to get around the gym, just having someone like Kirk show her where her favorite treadmill is or even help her identify which buttons to press is a huge help.

But for those who can't walk or sit up and basically have to teach themselves all over again, Kirk wants to build effective land and aquatic fitness therapy regimes that will help them one day get around on their own.

By working with clients' physical therapists, Kirk designs a routine that's safe and effective. After just a few sessions, he said, he notices a big difference.

"At first, they're a little shy, as if they were under a microscope," he said. "But after working with them for months or years, it's amazing to see them get back into the community."

Typically, physical therapists will charge \$150-\$300 per hour and patients must travel to a clinic. With Fitness Training Unlimited, trainers travel to the YMCA or recreation center closest to the patient. Kirk charges \$70 an hour and accepts most insurance.

At the Royal Oak YMCA, most of the workout machinery doesn't have Braille, so Edwards usually has to ask someone for help identifying how much weight to use. Although it's a smaller facility and Edwards

finds herself banging into machines while making her way through the fitness area, she's making vast improvements and likes that she doesn't have to find transportation to somewhere far from home.

She started working with Kirk two years ago.

"I wanted to get back into the gym, so when I found out about Greg I was really interested," Edwards said. "This fitness therapy has really shown me that I can do this on my own."

Kirk got some of his experience at the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan – Center for Spinal Cord Injury Recovery, where he worked for a year. One of the things he noticed was people with new disabilities being sent home too early with a routine to work on alone.

"We'd see a lot of progress with them, and the next week they'd be discharged, mainly for insurance purposes, and we'd never see them again," he said. "They'd be discharged whether they were ready or not."

He said most patients would be sent home with a fitness plan from their physical therapist, but they'd sit around waiting for insurance to kick back in, all while not being able to work out without assistance.

That's when Kirk formed Fitness Training Unlimited. Now he has 25 clients that vary in age and disability. He and his two fitness trainers travel as far south as Monroe to as far north as Washington Township; east out to Macomb Township and westward to Novi, where Kirk one day hopes to open a new fitness center that caters to the needs of the disabled.

"We'd go further if we had the clients," Kirk said. "We'll work with anyone who has a disability."

Kirk's team specializes in helping clients learn exercises that pertain to everyday movements and works hand in hand with physical therapists to devise appropriate plans.

"With the gym aspect, (Kirk) has really helped," Edwards said. "I'm getting a lot better at the gym, learning a lot of things to do on my own. He gave me a lot of guidance and taught me how to do things without being able to see."

Fitness Training Unlimited therapists work 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM, Monday through Friday. For more information, call the Macomb Township office at (586) 242-4480 or visit [www.ftunlimited.com](http://www.ftunlimited.com).