

Adaptive sailing program offers patients fun, hope

SAILING, from 1A

into a sailboat, I knew I had to get people in the hospital involved," she said.

Alison and other experts described to the Helen Hayes participants how modifications and adaptations could enable people with limited or no mobility to set out on the open water.

"The modifications don't have to be extensive," she told the group. "Maybe all you need is a piece of wood to transfer from a wheelchair."

Local residents who signed up for the class through Helen Hayes said they were eager to try.

"I'll float," John Creagh of Warwick joked, as he put on a life jacket in the rain before being helped onto a 23-foot keel, a type of sailboat. "But the (wheel) chair will sink."

Nancy Abramson had some previous boating experience despite serious spinal surgery more than 20 years ago that limited her movement.

A second operation on her back in August left her using a cane to get around.

"This is going to be a test for me," Abramson, a Pomona resident, said as she took part in the class. "A real challenge."

Billy Downing of West Haverstraw has been deaf since birth. A recent fall left him with limited mobility and dependent on a walker to get around.

He was excited about the idea of sailing for the first time.

"I like boats," he said in sign language, which was translated by his sister, Carol Reberholt.

Many people who sail before becoming disabled are surprised to learn that they can continue the sport even if they lack the use of their legs or have other physical ailments.

Hugh Eliot of Alexandria, Va., was an experienced sailor before both of his legs were amputated following a car crash in 1993.

"I knew my sailing career was over," he said.

But since then, he has become a champion sailor and a member of the U.S. Disabled Sailing team.

"In sailing, feet are optional," he told participants in the Nyack program.

There is already a large com-

Adaptive sports programs

Other adaptive sports programs offered by Helen Hayes Hospital:

■ **Handcycling:** A free handcycling clinic will be offered in conjunction with United Spinal at 3:30 p.m. June 14 at the hospital. Participants will be able to view the latest in handcycling equipment and will be able to try out the sport. Preregistration is required.

■ **Adaptive softball:** A game is scheduled for 4 p.m. July 19 at the hospital. The United Mets softball team, associated with United Spinal, will provide a lesson on adapted softball. Team

members will bring adapted equipment, and participants will play a full game. Preregistration is encouraged.

■ **GolfAbility:** An adaptive golf instruction program to teach the basics of golf to individuals with disabilities. GolfAbility workshops are scheduled for June 6, June 19, July 10, July 24, Aug. 7 and Aug. 24. Workshops are \$15 per session. GolfAbility outings will take place on a local golf course and are scheduled for June 12 and Sept. 11.

■ For information on any adaptive sports program, call Eileen Andreassi in the recreational therapy department at Helen Hayes Hospital at 845-786-4113.

munity of disabled sailors across the nation and the world.

John Twomey, a champion disabled Irish sailor who led a presentation, told participants that people with disabilities were welcome in sailing.

"A sailor is a sailor," he said.

Dr. Rick Doerr, a plastic surgeon at a New Jersey hospital, wasn't part of the Helen Hayes program.

Doerr, who suffered a traumatic injury during his medical training that left him in a wheelchair, was at the Nyack Boat Club the same day, preparing for a weekend race. He is a champion sailor and is training to take part in the 2008 Paralympic Games in Bei-

jing.

Doerr's boat was modified to meet his needs. It had a cushioned bench for him to sit on and a bar positioned in the middle of the boat for support. Some of the ropes were placed strategically so he could more easily reach them.

Sailing takes away the barriers that separate able-bodied athletes from the disabled, he said.

"Often other sailors don't even know I'm disabled until they see me on the dock," he said. "They're surprised. They say 'Hey, was that you out there?'"

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Vincent DiSalvio/The Journal News

Members of the Nyack Boat Club and Helen Hayes Hospital patients take part in an adaptive sailing day off the Nyack shore.