

Tennis therapy helps cancer survivors

Tappan resident starts free sessions at Bardonia club

By Emily Kratzer

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They don't have famous names like Navratilova, Sharapova, Federer or Nadal, but these tennis players want to win in straight sets as they match volleys with cancer.

One of them is Andrea Flatow, who is bringing the free Tennis For Life sessions to West Rock Indoor Sports and Entertainment Complex in Bardonia. Affiliated with the Hackensack University Medical Center, it was founded at the Ridgewood (N.J.) Racquet Club in 1998 by Marcia Devens, who died about 10 years ago.

Flatow, a resident of Tappan, learned about the group after seeing a flier at a lunch for retired teachers. A recent breast cancer survivor, she was looking for a different kind of support group.

"After an hour of tennis, whether you are taking a lesson or playing, the endorphins are pumping and the discussion takes on a relaxed, giving, sharing, upbeat level of camaraderie," Flatow said. That camaraderie sustains participants whose ages range from their 20s to 87.

She invites breast cancer survivors of all skills to attend, saying all they need is sturdy tennis shoes or sneakers.

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Other survivors testify on the group's website that even when they feel tired, the sessions lift their spirits.

That's how the late Marcia Devens coped after her diagnosis. She started Tennis For Life because of her love of the game and how it made her feel, said Scott Devens, who continued the program in honor of his wife.

"She realized this was helping her cope by projecting her energy on the ball and being focused on the game," Devens said. "Tennis helped her mentally and physically, and as a result she thought this positive approach would help others, too."

The Montebello resident said that his wife had been in traditional office-based support groups and found them

depressing.

"It was not a positive environment. Tennis combined therapy with activity," Devens said. "There's an amazing reaction in the group, to be able to share with people who understand."

"After the game is an hour of support time where participants get together, often with outside speakers, and the women share strategies for coping," Devens said, noting that while there are not many male breast cancer survivors involved, they are welcome. He said that more than 300 women have been involved in the program.

Instead of dealing with a medical professional, participants will get help from tennis pro Lauren Cash.

Cash was named Female Tennis Player of the Decade in Bergen County during



Tennis pro Lauren Cash of West Rock Indoor Sports and Entertainment Complex. SUBMITTED PHOTO

2010. Now a Nyack resident, she was known for her 95-1 record at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Demarest, N.J. She attended Boston College on a Division 1 tennis scholarship, but these days, she's

IF YOU GO

What: Tennis For Life

Where: West Rock Indoor Sports and Entertainment Complex, 21 Pralle Lane, (at Route 304), Bardonia.

When: 6 p.m. Tuesdays from July 5 into the fall, when the sessions will be Sunday afternoons.

Cost: Free.

Call: Andrea Flatow, 845-365-0147.

Online: tennisforlife.org.

more interested in helping people with their game.

"It's a social, relaxed environment for survivors that I am very honored to be a part of," she said. "Survivors will not only benefit from gaining stamina and upper body strength while on the tennis court, but they will have fun with people who have also overcome breast cancer."

That effort to overcome breast cancer is funded by donations, Devens said.