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STAFF PHOTOS: DOUG HOOD

The Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore, in Eatontown, offers support for cancer patients in various ways, including Qi Gong, an ancient Chinese movement believed to promote healing. Earl Williams of Red Bank participates in the class.

# Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore offers cancer patients support and more

By PATTI MARTIN
STAFF WRITER

The diagnosis of breast cancer was not a complete surprise for Amy Paradise. The 38-year-old mother of twins initially had been told she had a breast infection, which did not ring true to her.

"I knew, just knew, that it wasn't an infection," the Berkeley resident said. "I know my body ... and I knew it was serious."

After receiving the cancer diagnosis three years ago, Paradise had a harder time dealing with the emotional roller coaster she found herself on. "I'm a pretty positive person — I have to be. But there were times when I wanted — needed — support, a shoulder to lean on, a place where I could go just for me."

An Internet search led her to The Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore.

"I found a home away from home," Paradise said. "From the moment I walked in the door, this place filled a void in my life."

Located in the Victoria Commons at 613 Hope Road in Eatontown, the Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore is a place for support, education and hope for both people with cancer and those who care for them.

Part of a nationwide network of nonprofit wellness communities, the Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore opened its doors in 2007. It was the brainchild of Long Branch resident Ilene Winters.

Winters, whose mother succumbed to cancer in 2006, saw the need for a supportive cancer community in the area. Believing no one should face cancer alone, Winters decided to raise the money necessary to make a local Wellness Community a reality.

Ultimately, Winters, who worked on Wall Street for many years, raised $400,000.

"Following 9/11, I re-evaluated my life," said Winters, who serves as executive director of The Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore.

"I decided that if there was ever going to be a time for change, this was it. I was always interested in nutrition and physical fitness, and I decided to pursue my passion."

Combining that passion with compassion, Winters went about creating a space where people with cancer — and their family and friends — can have their nonmedical needs taken care of.

"Cancer is a hard diagnosis, and it takes a toll — and not just physically," Winters said.

Located on the second floor of the commons, the Wellness Community aims to be a home away from home for everyone involved.

The living room is large and spacious, with comfy chairs perbook. The kitchen area is easy to navigate — the kind of place to pull up a stool and get a cooking lesson or two. The yoga/exercise room with its walls painted soothing colors is a relaxing, tranquil environment.

"This is a place filled with positive energy," said Erin DeNardo of Neptune.

DeNardo originally started coming to the Wellness Community to support her father, who she is a yoga instructor.

"I came with my dad to do yoga," DeNardo said. "I wanted to be able to support him, and yoga became our thing."

DeNardo quickly realized how important the mind-body-spirit connection was, not just for people with cancer, but for family members and friends as well.

"The medical aspect is important, for sure," DeNardo said, "but so is the emotional and spiritual. Cancer changes a person — and the people around that person — and you have to deal with it in its entirety."

Moving into a teaching position was DeNardo's way of giving back.

"It's so positive, why wouldn't I?" she said.

At its very core, Winters said, the Wellness Community provides warmth and acceptance in a safe and comfortable environment.

"We are your community — a resource for education and information, a place to gain support where you can learn how to live fully with a cancer diagnosis," she said. "Just as importantly, we are a place where your loved ones can learn from — and with — you."

The mission is straightforward: to help people affected by cancer enhance their health and well-being through participation in professional programs of emotional support, education and hope.

All of the more than 60 programs offered are free of charge and center around four key areas: support groups, educational workshops, mind/body/spirit classes and social activities.

Participants can pick and choose programs based on their level of comfort and level of personal need.

Whether it's healthy cooking, Qi Gong for good health, early stage networking group, paint and play or guided imagery, participants can get as involved — or not — as they want to be.

For Paradise, the support afforded by the Wellness Community has been invaluable.

"The fact there there is such a great network here has been so beneficial," she explained. "You can reach out for support and there's a hand there ... whether it's dealing with doctors or dealing with a diagnosis of cancer, you'll find the support you need ... and many times you don't realize you needed the support until you have it."

Equally important, for Paradise, is exploring the mind-body connection.

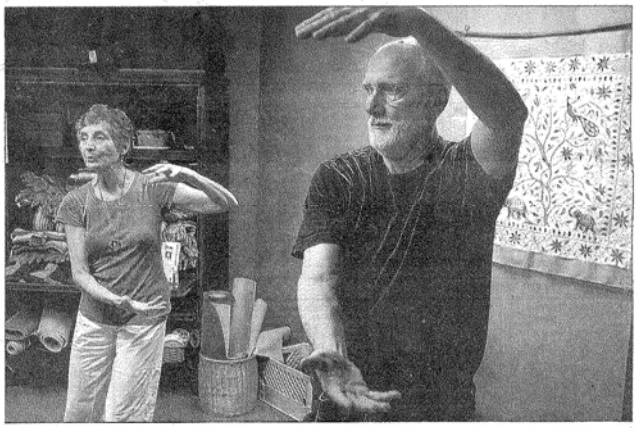
"You need to keep a positive attitude, and sometimes that's easier said than done," she admitted. "And taking care of your mind is just as important."

From a physician's point of view, doctors are realizing that treating a person isn't just about giving medicine or performing surgery.

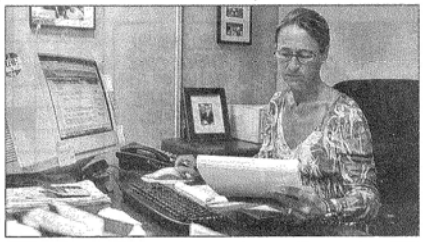
"We're looking at the whole picture, what makes the person physically better, emotionally better and psychologically better," said Dr. Michael Rose of the Plastic Surgery Center in Shrewsbury, who is also on the board of directors of the Wellness Community. "It's integrating an entire plan ... body and soul."

Rose, whose father is involved with a Wellness Community in Florida, says the concept's strength lies in its ability to complement the traditional medical model.

"There's yoga, nutrition, exercise, support groups, education, and the list goes on and on," he said. "We're taking care of the whole person."



Maxine Guenther of Middletown, an instructor, and Jim McCorkel of Holmdel, a student of Guenther's, lead the class in exercise.



Ilene Winters, executive director and founder of The Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore, at work in her office.

## WELLNESS COMMUNITY

FOR MORE INFORMATION

■ The Wellness Community of the Jersey Shore is located in Victoria Commons at 613 Hope Road in Eatontown. Call 732-578-9200 or go to www.thewellnesscommunity.org/jerseyshore on the Web.