

## Focus on health

# relief and recreation for Parkinson's patients

By URSULA MOORE

The song Ladies Night by Kool and the Gang is playing on the stereo, and the patients at Smithtown Parkinson Therapy Center are shaking their hips and clapping—a huge feat for individuals with a debilitating disease characterized by muscle rigidity, tremors and a slowing of physical movement.

The therapy center located at the United Methodist Church in Smithtown is nonsectarian. The program started in 1968 with a former pastor's wife having Parkinson's and wanting people to learn how to cope with it. The therapy center includes a group exercise area and a mat room containing updated fitness rehabilitation equipment.

"It is a very big deal for people who have Parkinson's disease to come here," said center director Julie Garofalo. "They get to exercise and talk about their feelings."

The program offers a staff doctor, registered nurse, licensed physical therapist and an exercise instructor. It is the only physical therapy center on Long Island that caters exclusively to Parkinson's and its particular problems.

"I do a lot of stretching with the patients because stiffness is a big part of having Parkinson's," physical

therapist Michael Badalamente said. "I have them do endurance activities, treadmills, free weights and stationary bikes."

Thankfully, individuals can come to the therapy center to loosen their limbs and have their spirits uplifted.

"We celebrate birthdays here, we have pizza and cake," said Ms. Garofalo. "I have been here 11 years, and it is wonderful to see everyone getting along so well. We have patients age 50 all the way to their late 80s come here, and everyone feeds off of each other. The flow of energy is great."

Parkinson Therapy Center patient Nora Bourrut, 66, of Smithtown, agreed. "I don't know where I would have been without this place," she said. "The anxiety is relieved here by talking to other people with Parkinson's."

Nancy Puleio, 68, of St. James happily attends the center once a week. "From the first time I came here, I was comfortable. Having Parkinson's, you feel like you are disappearing from life. You don't feel that way here," she said. "I deal with a lot of pain, and coming here helps a lot. It often feels like my body has been run over by a steamroller and my feet often feel like they are stuck in cement and the fatigue is incredible, too. I could have nine hours of sleep and still be tired."

Diagnosed six years ago with

Parkinson's, Norman Green, 75, of Nesconset enjoys the positive atmosphere too. "It raises my morale being with people that share the same problems," he said. "The exercises also help."

A drastic change in a patients' gait is a common occurrence in the center. "I have seen people come in here with a stooped walk," Ms. Garofalo said, "and now they are walking straight up."

The therapy group meets Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9:15 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. The center operates on a non-profit basis with only a minimal monthly charge to cover expenses. Prices are \$65 for one month for once-a-week participants, \$95 for one month for twice-a-week participants and \$115 for one month for three-times-a-week participants.

"There are no words to say how wonderful the staff and people are here," Mrs. Puleio said. "It's beyond great, and Julie is the kindest, most compassionate person. It is so uplifting here."

For additional information about Smithtown Parkinson Therapy Center, call 631 265-6621 or visit <http://sptc.akwebb.net>.

**GETTING BACK ON TRACK:** Nancy Puleio leads the participants during a walking exercise at the Smithtown Parkinson Therapy Center. "Having Parkinson's, you feel like you are disappearing from life," Mrs. Puleio said. "You don't feel that way here."

