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PHOTO BY LISA HELFERT

Freda Ripps, 12, plays an active game at Fitness for Health, a therapeutic services and training center in Knoxville. For more, turn to page 222.

FUN & GAMES

At Fitness for Health in Rockville, trainer Marc Sickel turns therapy and exercise into entertainment for clients with special needs

BY MELANIE PADGETT POWERS

PHOTOS BY LISA HELFERT



Marc Sickel (right) and 12-year-old Filippo Raponi



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FILIPPO RAPONI STEADIES HIS black New Balance sneakers with red laces on what looks like a miniature surfboard. It rocks slightly on invisible waves—side to side, front to back—as the 12-year-old watches for LED lights flashing from discs mounted on the wall in front of him. His eyes dart back and forth, then he hits each blinking disc with his right hand while trying to maintain his balance.

“You’re doing a great job. I’m proud of you, buddy,” says Marc Sickel, founder and owner of Fitness for Health in Rockville. The therapeutic services and training center uses exergaming—fitness through the use of games—to help children and adults, especially those with special needs. Sickel, an athletic trainer, continues to praise the boy

throughout the five-minute session, and Filippo mimics him: “Yeah, buddy,” he says. The boy occasionally pauses and claps for himself while smiling. He turns back toward Sickel, 56, and holds up his hand, signaling for a high-five, all while continuing to balance. After the two slap palms, Filippo exclaims “thank you!” with a higher-pitched emphasis on the first word.

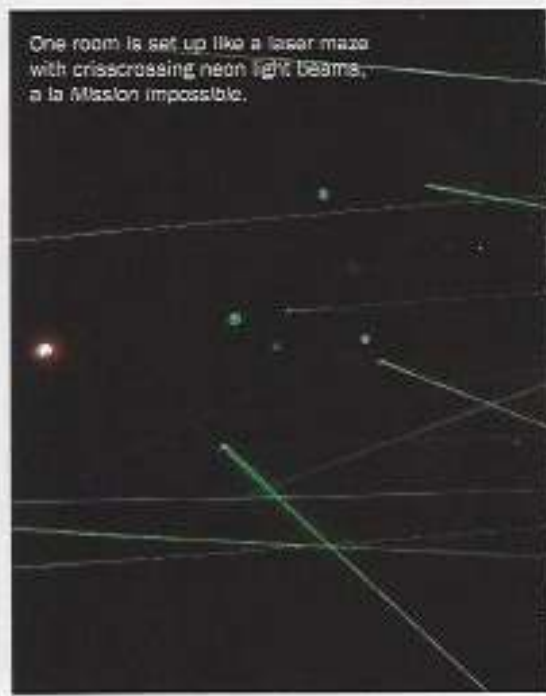
Filippo doesn’t realize that he’s exercising. He doesn’t know that he’s working on his low muscle tone and trying to improve his coordination. All he knows is that he’s having fun playing with his friend Marc. The sixth-grader at The Frost School in Rockville has fragile X syndrome, a genetic condition that causes intellectual disabilities and other

developmental delays. Filippo’s parents, Amelia Gotti and Paolo Raponi, who live in Potomac, first noticed their youngest son’s problems when he was a baby. “He was not crawling. He was not sitting properly,” Gotti says. After Filippo was diagnosed at 16 months, “it was a very long journey to find the right people.” He didn’t start talking until he was 7; he now speaks in short phrases, not complete sentences.

When Filippo was about 3, another mom of a child with fragile X recommended Fitness for Health. Gotti was immediately impressed by the staff’s patience with her son, who threw a temper tantrum on their first visit, and was surprised to hear Sickel say he wanted to meet with Filippo’s behavioral



Fitness for Health has 17 exergaming stations along with a rock wall and mini artificial turf field.



One room is set up like a laser maze with crisscrossing neon light beams, à la Mission Impossible.



Filippo Raponi, who was born with fragile X syndrome, has been coming to Fitness for Health for nine years.



Lola Byron was diagnosed with a mild case of cerebral palsy as a child, but the illness rarely affected her until she started having trouble walking in her mid-50s. Now 73, the Bethesda resident comes in for training three days a week.

therapist. Sickel later helped connect Gotti with someone who advised her on potty-training Filippo, a process that took two years. Over time, Gotti noticed Sickel tweaking the games so he could work on Filippo's colors, numbers and ABCs in addition to his motor skills.

Nine years after they started working together, Sickel still remembers the way Filippo tried to run away at first, how it took a lot of coaxing at each session just to get him inside. Now the boy can't wait to arrive.

WHEN THE MOTHER OF a 21-year-old with a rare form of dwarfism asked Sickel to teach her daughter how to ride a bike, he broke it down into steps. First

the young woman needed to improve her balance, so Sickel had her stand on one foot, then on a wobbly board. Next she had to learn the motor skills involved. She sat on a bike as Sickel held on to the back of it and explained to her that the faster she moved the pedals, the easier it would be to keep the bike upright. "Like a spinning top," he said. Then he showed her how to shift her weight. Eventually, with Sickel's help, she began to ride. Then he let go.

"I can remember when her mom came out, and tears are rolling down her face," says Sickel, a father of two. "It's when you have moments like that that tell you 'this is what it's all about.' So many times kids have the skills, but they don't believe it.

You gotta get them to believe it."

Growing up, Sickel wasn't confident in his own abilities. In elementary school, he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and a severe learning disability. "I was getting myself in trouble because I couldn't sit still in the classroom," he says. "Quite frankly, my level of hyperactivity would probably increase when things were very hard for me to understand."

He estimates that he attended seven different elementary and middle schools in Montgomery County—at one point he was homeschooled for six months while his parents figured out where to send him next. Things got better at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda,

where Sickel took advantage of the peer tutoring program and improved academically. But when he tried out for the junior varsity football team, in the hopes of fitting in and making friends, he became even more frustrated with himself. "Just doing the drills was too hard," says Sickel, who lives in Silver Spring with his wife, Melanie. "I was just not coordinated...and it only made me feel worse."

When he was 16, Sickel asked the athletic director at Whitman if he could become an athletic trainer, and soon he was working with the football, baseball and basketball teams, learning how to evaluate and manage injuries. "I liked helping the athletes feel better and get back to where they were," he says. "It was very nice because I really built a rapport with students I probably would not have known otherwise."

Sickel attended West Virginia University for two years and set his sights on the school's athletic trainer program, but when he applied at the end of his sophomore year, he didn't get in. He started over at the University of Maryland—most of his college credits didn't transfer—which offered an athletic trainer program that was more like an apprenticeship, he says. He was a trainer for the men's football, lacrosse, soccer and track teams before graduating in 1986 with a degree in kinesiology.

After graduation, Sickel worked as an athletic trainer in a hospital wellness program, then at a community center and fitness center before taking a job at the Landon School in Bethesda. He built an athletic training business on the side, which the school allowed him to promote, and started to develop his own philosophy as a trainer. At the time, resistance parachutes for running were becoming popular among high-level athletes, and Sickel wondered if they would help kids have fun while they exercised. He invested in a few parachutes and strapped them to some of his young clients' backs. The kids went farther—without complaining—and

laughed as they ran, so he began to brainstorm other ways to make fitness more enjoyable.

"I have you working on one thing, but I'm actually working on something else but you don't even realize that—you actually think you're playing a game," he says. The Fitness for Health concept was born. After eight years at Landon, Sickel decided to focus on his business full time. In the mid-'90s, he leased his current space on Rockville Pike, across the street from the old White Flint Mall.

THE MAIN ROOM AT Fitness for Health has 17 exergaming stations and feels like a cross between a gym and an arcade. Flashing lights and beeping sounds come from large freestanding

per visit or purchase a package.) Other clients come in for weight management and wellness classes, or for the facility's athletic performance development program, all of which utilize the exergaming concept. Exergaming can help improve reaction time, peripheral vision, balance, kinesthetic sense (what your body is doing in relation to things around you) and motor skills.

"We take a lot for granted, just even catching a ball or kicking a ball," says Sickel, who often works with clients on motor planning tasks such as tying their shoes. His own daughter, Amanda, who also has ADHD, graduated from college with a degree in psychology and now works with children who have special needs. "Kids very low in motor [skills]

“SO MANY TIMES KIDS HAVE THE SKILLS, BUT THEY DON'T BELIEVE IT,” MARC SICKEL SAYS. “YOU GOTTA GET THEM TO BELIEVE IT.”

and wall-mounted machines. The floor is made of recycled tires. There's a rock wall, mini artificial turf field and a long, narrow trampoline. Doors open to reveal four smaller rooms that are games themselves: One is filled with a glow-in-the-dark climbing wall; another is a dark room that can be set up like a laser maze with crisscrossing neon green light beams a la *Mission Impossible*. Another room has a light board for a floor.

Sickel and his staff—which includes occupational, speech and physical therapists—see clients ranging in age from 2½ to 91. Many have developmental disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome and ADHD, and take one-on-one sessions with the type of trainer or therapist they need. (There are no memberships to Fitness for Health; clients can pay

have low confidence, low self-esteem, and that leads to an incredible amount of stress," Sickel says.

About 18 years ago, Ethan Ulanow's parents, Les and Lori, decided to try exergaming at Fitness for Health to help their then-kindergartener, who struggled with extreme emotions that often showed up as anger. The youngster had seen specialist after specialist but never received an accurate diagnosis.

Ethan, now 22, describes himself as a "special needs poster child of the '90s." He couldn't control his behavior—at school, he would kick, throw pencils, scream and flip desks. "My parents were always my biggest advocates. They were always the ones looking for new programs, looking for new things," he says.

But Ethan wanted nothing to do with

Fitness for Health. The first time he spotted the Trazer, an interactive gaming system similar to the Nintendo Wii, he hid behind the TV. "I was so terrified," he says. "It was a new environment, and I did not like new things."

Sickel sat on the floor near him. "It's OK, bud, it's OK," Sickel said. "You can come out—we're here to have fun." Ethan spent his first 30-minute session hiding. But after a few more visits he began to warm up to Sickel, and to the games. After spending his days in school being told, "Don't do this. Don't climb on that. Don't touch that," Fitness for Health became an outlet.

"Now you're climbing on a climbing wall, you're throwing balls at a light-up wall...you're in an indoor batting cage," says Ethan, who graduated from Winston Churchill High School in Potomac. "Honestly, for a while I thought my parents were just paying for me to have fun."

Being able to let out his stress helped improve his behavior and increase his activity level. But he still struggled at times. "It's this magical thing," he says. "In my darkest of times, I would go to Fitness for Health and really feel like myself, and feel happy."

For Ethan, it helped to know that his trainer understood what he was going through. Sickel had told him, as he often tells children who are frustrated or discouraged, that he himself had a learning disability. "Growing up, I wasn't really skilled at sports," Sickel said. "It took time, but don't ever give up." Last December Ethan received a degree in psychology from American University. He's currently earning a master's degree in social work at Columbia University in New York, hoping to help kids like him.

at all the "kids games" and thought, *This is baloney*. The Bethesda resident didn't hide her skepticism. Sickel chuckles, remembering her saying something like, "How are these toys going to help me?"

"I took that as a challenge," he says.

Byron, who calls herself "an open-minded skeptic," began working with Sickel twice a week and quickly noticed a difference in herself. She'd been diagnosed with cerebral palsy (CP) as a child, but it was a mild case and rarely affected her. In her mid-50s, while on a European vacation with her husband, she started having trouble walking. "Then I began to notice all kinds of little things," Byron says. Her balance was shaky, her energy and endurance were lower than usual. It became hard to lift her legs, which would drag slightly. She fell a lot. She searched for someone who specialized in adults with CP—physicians, physical therapists, personal trainers—but

WHEN LOLA BYRON, NOW 73, met Sickel three years ago, she looked around



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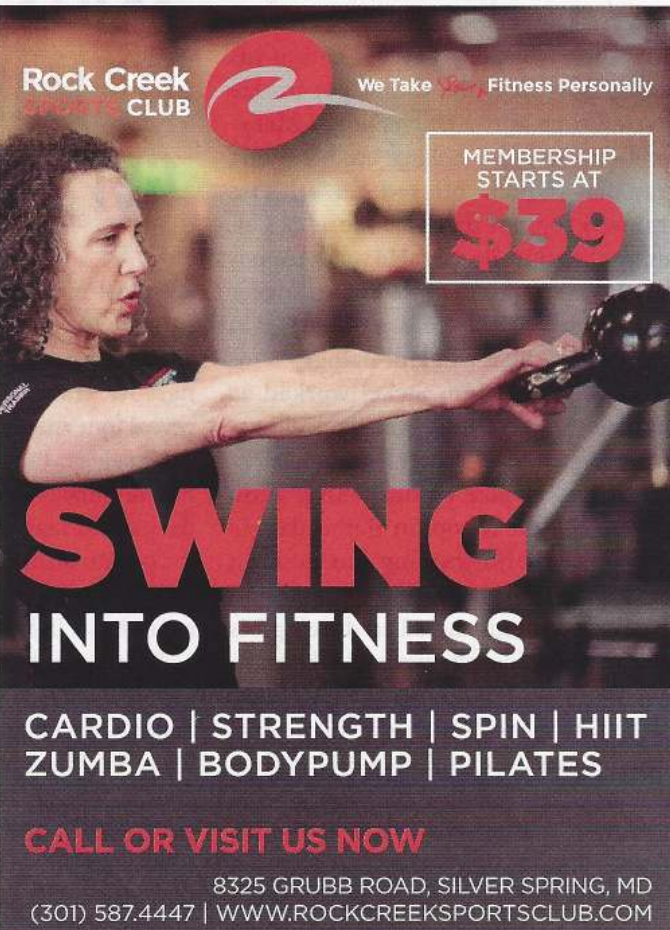
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nobody could help improve her balance and coordination. Years later, a doctor recommended Fitness for Health.

In one of Byron's first sessions, Sickel had her walk on the trampoline. He and another staff member had to hold her, one on each side, so she wouldn't fall. "Putting her in such an unstable environment shocks the system," Sickel says. Byron also worked with the Trazer, walking in different directions as she followed a red dot. "What's interesting is that the movement can be difficult, but if you are looking at a red dot in a square... you're not really conscious of what your body is doing," she says.

Byron soon walked the length of the trampoline without assistance. After about a year, she went up three flights of stairs at Fitness for Health without using the handrail. It had been decades since she'd walked up stairs unassisted. She increased her sessions to three days

a week, working with different trainers, including Sickel. "I know I have CP; I know I'm aging," she says. But Fitness for Health is keeping her strong and staying off severe symptoms—she's no longer frustrated and worried about what her future holds. "I think it's done a lot for me emotionally," she says.

THROUGHOUT A 30-MINUTE session on a Friday night in March, Filippo can't contain his excitement for what's coming next. On Fridays, Fitness for Health contracts with ZamDance, a local program that leads a high-impact dance fitness class for kids and adults with special needs. Participants can pay a drop-in fee or buy a package of one-hour sessions.

Every minute or two during his session with Sickel, Filippo exclaims to anyone who will listen: "ZamDance!" Sickel replies each time, "Yeah, ZamDance," and continues working with the boy, keeping

him on task. Filippo jumps up and down on the trampoline as Sickel tosses colored rings to him. After he catches a ring, the boy hops over to the same colored cone on the trampoline and places the ring on it. Later he tosses a 6-pound SandBell weight—a soft, neoprene weight filled with sand—into large tubes, depending on where a light flashes. He runs up a sloped and padded mat along the wall to snag letters of the alphabet.

Finally, ZamDance founder Jackie Zamora arrives and begins to set up. Filippo stands patiently to the side, facing the same direction as Zamora, toward the handful of other awaiting dancers. The lights go off. Everyone glows in the dark, and a fast, loud beat emits throughout the room. "ZamDance!" Filippo exclaims. He begins to move his feet side to side. ■

Melanie Padgett Powers is a freelance writer and editor in Silver Spring.

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