

NUMBER CRUNCHING

9.8 The percentage of Sussex County's population that is Latino, according to a "health needs assessment" of Sussex and three Maryland counties — Worcester, Wicomico and Somerset — by TidalHealth and two county health departments. That percentage was the highest of all four counties.

458 The number of tax dollars, in millions, generated annually by economic activity in the Inland Bays region, according to a recently released study. The report asserts that investments in improved water quality would have a significant impact on the local economy by increasing tax revenues, property values, and the number of available jobs.

ONLINE See the report at inlandbays.org/about-the-bays/economic-value-of-the-inland-bays.

10 The number of years since Hurricane Sandy threatened a direct hit on coastal Delaware before it shifted to the north and slammed into New Jersey. ■



DOWN TO BOX

A Special Chance to Get In the Ring



Brad Rankin, left, and Connor Watson, right, celebrate Wilson Sharp, middle, as he completes a round of boxing bag warm-ups during a recent Down to Box class in Georgetown.

Every Tuesday evening, Wilson Sharp eagerly puts on his backpack and waits by the door for his mom to drive him 35 minutes or so to Flex World Fitness in Georgetown.

The Milford resident isn't jonesing for just any workout. He, along with about half a dozen other young adults from southern Delaware, is gearing up for what his mother describes as "the highlight of his week": the Down to Box program.

"No matter how tired and pressed I am, I've gotta get him here — even if it's for 15 minutes," Debra Scott says.

Sharp is nonverbal with a dual diagnosis of autism and Down syndrome — his mother's "homie with an extra chromie," as she likes to say. But even though he doesn't speak words, his beaming smiles at fellow students emanate the pride he has in how many sit-ups he can do. Sharp's focused gaze ends with a satisfied grin as he learns to take the right stance to lean into a right hook. And at each lesson, no matter what time they arrive, this young man is always greeted with an enthusiastic cheer of "WILSONNNN" from the instructor and classmates alike.

"Anyone who meets Wilson, you can't help but to love Wilson," says class instructor Pete Marconi, who has been involved with the sport of boxing for about 45 years. "It's just the most refreshing brand of camaraderie I've ever seen."

Down to Box was started in 2018 at a northern Delaware gym as an active way to empower individuals with Down syndrome. The nonprofit program reached Sussex County by 2020, where it's free for the students, thanks to donations from the annual Boardwalk Buddy Walk fundraiser in Rehoboth Beach. Down to Box programs can now be found at three Delaware gyms and in multiple states across the country. Soon, there will be about a dozen discounted programs nationwide, says co-founder Lauren Camp Gates.

"We started the program because there's a lack of consistent programming for adults with disabilities, especially exercise-based," she says. "Providing social opportunities for adults with disabilities and something that is fun, but also incorporates exercise, was a big need in the community."

The Georgetown gym welcomes students from across the county, including coastal Sussex, to join in for an hour each week as Dagsboro's Marconi leads them through the basics of boxing.

"We mix it up so we don't keep doing the same thing over and over," says the instructor, who got involved after working for one of the program's co-founders. The program features a lot of warming up and one-on-one punching combinations with students and Marconi. He says he hopes it gives participants not only a good workout and lessons in how to use and handle their bodies, but also some self-defense skills, should they ever be needed.

"I think they're more supportive of each other's goals and gains than the average person," he says. "There's no jealousy. There's no competition. There's no rivalries. It's just complete cooperation, and they have this joy for each other that's so refreshing."

For some of the students, the program is about physicality and exercise. But arguably even more important for many is the socialization they all get while bobbing and weaving, says Pot-Nets Lakeside resident Susan Yohe.

For her adopted autistic son, Brad Rankin, the Down to Box classes give him more of a social life than he gets hanging out at home. He longs for independence, which is one of the biggest challenges parents face, Yohe notes.

"As far as Brad goes, he's the easiest kid in the world. No drama, no problems," she says, adding that he loves learning new things. "But he doesn't have a social community for kids like him."

When he's not working at Grain on the Rocks in Lewes or participating in Special Olympics, Brad spends a lot of his time with his mom. So having the weekly activity and camaraderie at Down to Box is key, Yohe says.

"I look forward to it," says Rankin, who notes that, though he loves the sport, the friendships he's made have become even more important. "I get excited when we go there and start to do boxing. I feel better about myself. I just love it." ■

— Maddy Lauria

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Down to Box instructor Pete Marconi, on the right in both photos, works with students Brad Rankin, top, and Torie Moore, bottom, during warm-up boxing exercises at a Georgetown gym. The Down to Box program aims to offer active ways for individuals with Down syndrome and other disabilities to stay fit and engage with their peers.