

Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies
NEDSRA Veterans' Fitness Initiative
Aubrey Youngs

Aubrey Youngs, a former E4 specialist and motor transport operator in the Indiana Army National Guard, never thought that her injury would occur off the desert terrain of Afghanistan's battlefield.

An accident five years ago left Youngs, 27, permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Today, she uses a manual wheelchair to perform daily functions. Thanks to her military liaison, Youngs learned of Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies, a special pilot program spearheaded by NEDSRA. Under its Veterans' Fitness Initiative, the agency partnered with Club Fitness and the Addison Park District, the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and U.S. Paralympics, to offer veterans returning from service with a disability the opportunity to continue their physical rehabilitation after completing programs offered through the VA.

Each eligible veteran receives a full-year Fitness Pass for both themselves and a workout partner to Club Fitness; personal training sessions with a certified trainer; post-rehabilitative exercise materials for home use; and expert advice to help them achieve their fitness goals. Veterans also have the opportunity to meet other participants through several social activities held at NEDSRA.

Youngs, who lives in suburban Alsip, is one of the program's first veterans to sign up. For several months, she worked with her trainer at Club Fitness concentrating on her upper body strength on special machines such as weighted pulleys that allow her to not move from her wheelchair. Her main goal, she explained, was to improve core balance, upper body strength and to lose weight.

The path that led Youngs to NEDSRA began with joining the Guard at age 20 in 2002. Her duties included transporting goods and troops when needed. She was called to serve in Iraq in 2003 and, when that mission was cancelled, she returned home to Newburgh, Indiana. In 2004, she served in Afghanistan at a supply warehouse.

The next year dramatically changed her life. She was thrown off the edge of a shelf and forklift, sustained a severe concussion and complete spinal separation that left her permanently paralyzed. Severe complications kept her in the hospital for nine months.

After her stay, she returned home to her parents. It was not easy for her to physically move because her parents' home was still under construction. "Moving about was hard to do because I couldn't get to things or didn't have the strength to do others," Youngs said.

Her disability did not stop her from earning a bachelor's degree or driving to do errands. Her biggest challenge was taking day and overnight trips where she might fall down and not have any help.

"My mom frequently got phone calls from me venting or crying because I was frustrated over something," she said. "It was hard not to be able to get into the hotel bathroom or to get out of a tub. It took me time to get the arm strength to do some things and longer to get the confidence and get over the fear to attempt others."

Life has changed for Youngs since moving to Alsip and entering NEDSRA's Veterans' Fitness Initiative program. The move allowed her to be closer to DePaul University where is studying for a masters degree in game development. Her plan is to design and build rehabilitation simulations for people of all ages and conditions.

Now that her sessions with the personal trainer have finished, she will continue to work out on her own with her newfound knowledge. Besides the exercising, Youngs received other benefits. “I have gained some confidence in venturing out of the house and working with others,” said Youngs. “The program has allowed me to start setting a schedule and working with it despite complications.”

Would Youngs recommend the program? She says yes, definitely. “The gym is fairly easy to get around in and there are plenty of machines a person can use without the use of their legs,” she said. “The trainers all seem very nice and helpful, especially with those machines that require some assistance.”