

Whose Bodies? Every-Bodies!: Every-Bodies Fitness aims to make fitness accessible for LGBTQ+ youth

When **Melissa DeLuca** was in high school in the 1980s, she was banned from the field hockey team because she was gay - an experience that now fuels her unique exercise program for LGBTQ+ youth.



Melissa DeLuca

Every-Bodies Fitness is the non-profit DeLuca formed in 2019 to make the experience of exercising and staying healthy inclusive. She partners with area gyms for space to teach free classes. Now she offers boxing, a personal exercise favorite, and plans to expand to crew in 2022 by partnering with the Narragansett Boat Club. She also envisions future classes in dance, fencing, golf, tennis and horseback riding.

“Every Saturday, kids ages 14 to 25 come and learn how to box. More than 65 youth have participated,” DeLuca said of the classes, offered at a Warwick gym for LGBTQ+ youth as well as allies and supporters. “These are sports most urban LGBTQ+ youth don’t have access to, mainly because of money.”

The vision for an organized athletic program began to gel when she worked as activities director at

Youth Pride Rhode Island. When kids learned she boxed, they wanted to join. She finds similar interest from youth through her current work as a clinical social worker based at Mt. Pleasant High School.

Her passion comes from feeling left out herself. After her negative field hockey experience, DeLuca wanted to join the college crew team but was told she needed to lose weight.

“That led to an eating disorder,” she said.

Eventually, however, she began to appreciate her body and “what it can do, not what it can’t do.”

“I developed more positive body image concepts and began working on mental health approaches like cognitive restructuring, mindfulness and motivational interviewing,” she explained.

Those lessons linger and provide structure to Every-Bodies Fitness. When working with young boxing students, DeLuca runs them through fitness circuits, asking what they feel they’re doing right versus what they need to improve.

It’s important for DeLuca, a lesbian from a biracial family, to help others feel like they belong. Physical activity, she’s discovered, can appeal to all sizes, identities and skill levels. She referred to National Institutes of Health research that indicated LGBTQ+ youth are two and a half times less physically active than their cisgender classmates, and calling for steps to engage the population in exercise more directly.

“We provide physical activity and positive mental support, surrounded by people who are nonjudgmental. You can be any size or ability,” said DeLuca, whose personal training side gig finances Every-Bodies Fitness. This includes transportation which started bringing kids to the gym in December.

“Kids who identify as nonbinary or transgender say they don’t feel comfortable in mainstream gyms, and a lot won’t join sports teams as a result,” she said. “These are vulnerable kids. They come and may not feel good about themselves, that they’re out of shape or not strong enough.”

Eventually, she’d like to secure a permanent space of her own where she can run a boutique gym that adults can join and whose fees would support the youth program.

Every-Bodies Fitness is open to all LGBTQ+ youth. For more information on the program - as well as details on DeLuca’s income-based personal training work - go to everybodiesfitness.org/about.