

BRANFORD

Rowers rally to keep doors open

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By Lisa Reisman



BRANFORD — On the day Joe Criscuolo first took a class at PULL Rowing, the South Main Street studio next to the old Branford Theater, he barely got through it. Before then, he'd rarely exercised. He was out of shape. He was, as he put it, "saggy."

Still, he went back. Soon, "I was hooked," said the North Branford resident, one of the main protagonists in the story of how, in the space of one week in late March, PULL Rowing became Crew Rowing. **"...It's really about the people, the crew. It's the crew that made this work."**

Joe Criscuolo, North Branford resident

"There were the unique workouts," he said, of the low-impact, cardio-based rowing drills combined with high-intensity strength training. "And also the camaraderie. I looked forward to it. I think all the members did."

Then, on Feb. 16, came an email from the owners of PULL Rowing. The company had decided to go in a different direction and would be closing the studio. The last day of classes would be Saturday, March 30.

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From left, Frank Carrano, of Branford; Theresa Ferguson, of Branford; Carolyn Christmann, of New Haven; and Cat Haddon of East Haven; during a training session Crew Rowing in Branford on May 10.

ROWING

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"At first it was like a death in the family," said April Palmer, a co-owner, with husband Jim, and with Criscuolo and his wife Deb, of Crew Rowing. "People were distraught. There were tears and hugging. But then we rallied. We had six weeks. No way were we going to let this place close."

There were meetings — in the lounge of the gym, at the houses of members. There were ideas — members purchasing individual rowers, for example — that floated and sank. There were more meetings. Members came forward only to get cold feet. Others, like Criscuolo and his wife, eagerly took the plunge.

"We really wanted to be in on this happening," Criscuolo said.

All along, the clock was ticking. If no agreement was reached by Monday, April 1, the doors of PULL rowing would clang shut for good.

The final class was on Saturday, March 30. Six days before, April and Jim had signed a lease for the space. On Sunday, they, along with the Criscuolos, paid the former owners for the rowers, the equipment, and furniture.

That's hardly the only thing they did that late-March Sunday. The four newly minted co-owners changed all the names and the logo which Jim, an accomplished artist, had created.

They replaced the sign with the new name of the business.

"Another member helped us with the research," Jim Palmer said. "We wanted Crew Rowing because it describes what the sport is, first of all, and it also describes a group of people who have bonded together and are rowing together as a crew. The name was available, so we grabbed it."

Late Sunday night, March 31, they completed the transformation. Then, April Palmer said, "came a lot of praying."

"We didn't have a client list," she said. "The website we used for people to sign up for classes wasn't up and running, and the merchant account wasn't either."

She told as many members as she could to "just show up and we'd work it out later," she said.

They showed up Monday morning and, in the five weeks since, they've kept coming, and in ever greater numbers.

The reason, according to Jim Palmer, was not just the sleek WaterRowers that use water to mimic rowing on a river and afford a fluid motion. Nor was it rowing itself which, as Nicole Catanese of Harper's Bazaar writes, "might be the most efficient exercise ever," with its cardiovascular benefits, and the way it works all the major muscle groups while burning up to 600 to 800 calories per hour.

"It was really what the former owners



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Co-owners April Palmer and her husband Jim Palmer of Crew Rowing, a low-impact and rowing exercise gym in Branford.

called 'the magic sauce,' he said, referring to rowing intervals interspersed with dynamic strength exercises with kettlebells and medicine balls, as well as weighted plank variations, push-ups, lunges and squats.

Not to mention the trainers, whose expertise, warmth, and sense of fun, "have played such a large role in making Crew Rowing what it is," Jim Palmer said.

Those trainers were, in part, what lured Branford's Theresa Ferguson back; it was also the variety of their workouts. "They're different every time, so you never get bored. Plus I've lost 16 inches and 22 pounds since I joined," she said.

For Linda MacLean, "it's a stress-reliever, and I'm just a lot stronger and a lot more toned." Because there are only 12 rowers, "the classes are small, so you always get a lot of individualized attention from the trainers."

Then there's the spa-like setting. "We're carrying on a legacy that we came to love and respect," said April. "Like the former owners, we keep the space immaculate. There's never any dirt or dust. Everyone gets an individual towel, a cold compress to cool down. Water bottles get filled during workouts. It's like nowhere else."

Above all, though, their members "came back for the people," as Ferguson put it. "Everyone encourages each other, everyone is cheering each other on. There are a lot of sweaty high-fives."

In the end, said Frank Carrano, "as much as we were all devoted to the former owners, once we recognized that it was more than them that drew us here, it was up to us to keep it going."

Criscuolo agreed. "Sure I've lost a lot of weight, a lot of inches. And I feel better. I have more stamina. I just feel good about myself," he said. "But it's really about the people, the crew. It's the crew that made this work."

Crew Rowing is at 27 South Main St., Branford. For more information visit, crewrowingllc.com, email; info@crewrowingllc.com, or call 203-315-0209.