

Charitable Hearts and Hands

Serving the Underserved

BY KARRIE OSBORN



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assage therapists and bodyworkers have long recognized the importance of serving the underserved and providing bodywork to those who need it most. They know the power of the gift they offer, especially when it's volunteered from the heart.



While monetary donations are always effective, volunteering time and service—in any realm—is the type of charitable giving that can create lasting change for the giver and the recipient. Scratch below the surface of the massage profession and you'll see this type of giving in action. For some massage therapists, working with the underserved creates balance. For others, it creates dreams. Following are a few of their stories.

SEEING THE BEAUTY WITHIN: SUSAN LALLAK

Indiana massage therapist Susan Lallak says she remembers well the day her professional life grew to include volunteer work. When she saw a group of homeless people receiving goods from a donation truck one morning, her charitable purpose came to light.

Now Lallak spends several hours each week giving massage services to those less fortunate in her Indiana community. As a volunteer with the Visiting Nurse Service (VNS), Lallak makes weekly visits to the terminally ill, financially deprived patients at Abbie Hunt Bryce Home (AHBH).

“My role is to bring comfort and relief and to reduce stresses that are a part of coping with terminal illness on a daily basis,” she says. For a client struggling with end-of-life issues and severe financial strain, caring professionalism in a safe, dignified, and respectable environment is needed. That’s what Lallak tries to bring to this group of clients. “It is an awesome experience to freely offer the gift of touch to the underserved people who need it most.”



Alternative Healthcare Access Campaign volunteer Pamela Alt massages a client.

Lallak’s stories of success at AHBH are all treasured experiences. There was the man who, in his final days, chose massage over his pain medication. Clearly in pain upon her arrival, the patient asked Lallak not to call the nurse for his meds, but to proceed with the massage as planned. “He had tears in his eyes and I knew that would be the last time I saw him—and it was.”

Or there’s the client who found simple comfort in Lallak’s hands. “She had a huge release of tension as soon as I first laid my hands on her. I commented that she doesn’t get pampered enough. She said, ‘No one will touch me anymore.’ That really tugged at my heart.” Lallak understood in that instant that her touch might be the only comfort this woman had to hold on to.

Lallak appreciates that it’s not always easy for some people to be around the dying, and the stereotypes we create in our minds can often be frightening, but people are just people. “These people are you and I. They

may have had a difficult life, or perhaps made some bad choices, but they are just as human as the rest of us. They are loving, giving, and appreciative people that I am so glad to have as a part of my life.” She says offering kind, gentle touch to this underserved group, especially when they have never had massage before, is a special experience. “Although I know what I do helps them, these people have all touched me on a personal, professional, and human level. It has opened my eyes to the internal beauty of humans.”

Lallak says serving others in need is a powerful thing. “Massage work for these clients is like heaven to them and blessings to us. Consider donating a couple of hours once or twice a month to make a difference

The act of giving doesn't just feel good, it's good for you. Researchers from the University of Oregon found that charitable giving stimulates the caudate nucleus and the nucleus accumbens in the brain, creating positive physiological effects similar to those derived from meeting the basic human needs of food and shelter.¹



in someone's life. Your whole heart should be in it, solely for the purpose of making that difference."

HELPING THEM COME HOME: CYNTHIA PRICE

Trained in massage therapy since 1981, Cynthia Price maintained a private practice for 18 years before closing shop and moving to Seattle to earn her PhD. She wanted to focus on her area of clinical and research interest and expertise: working with survivors of sexual abuse. Along the way, Price found herself volunteering time to the Alternative Healthcare Access Campaign (AHAC), a nonprofit Seattle organization that provides massage and other complementary therapies to people who are homeless or low-income.

Now a research assistant professor at the University of Washington, Price recently helped AHAC earn a \$5,000 Massage Therapy Foundation (MTF) community service grant that will help bring in and train volunteers to sustain the nonprofit. "Massage schools rarely provide adequate training on how to work with vulnerable populations," Price says. "This training will focus primarily on the emotional issues

that can arise, and will describe some of the necessary skills and strategies one can use in practice," she says, citing the sensitivities needed to work with this underserved community, including helping the client feel comfortable and safe. Price says that to do so, "The practitioner must communicate this verbally and through the quality of his or her touch.

"The majority of homeless and low-income individuals served by AHAC have suffered tremendous hardship and personal challenges. Many are addicts or are recovering from addiction, many live with chronic mental and/or physical health problems, and many have trauma from child abuse, assault, domestic violence, military violence, or rape. Many live far away from, or are emotionally separated from, family and those they love. The stress of homelessness, combined with these common personal health issues, is typically overwhelming."

One of Price's AHAC clients, Debbie, offers a perfect example of the value and importance of this degree of communicative touch. "Debbie struggles with posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD], diabetes, and depression. One of the common features of PTSD is a profound sense of fear and the absence of feeling safe in the world. Debbie talked about the impact of receiving massage from therapists she saw consistently over a year's time at an AHAC site. 'Homelessness is, in itself, extremely stressful,' she told me. 'I had so much stress and pain in my body. Massage lowered the pain level and the stress at the same time, helping me to relax. Having PTSD, it comes down to trust. Trust is a big issue for a lot of women. Some of us have had really bad parents—criminals or abusers. Getting help for PTSD in a safe setting and with practitioners who I could trust, helped me to trust others.'" This appreciative client told Price it was a blessing and a kindness to get bodywork from caring volunteers.

That's where the power of touch comes into play. "As a practitioner," Price says, "there is nothing more rewarding than providing an opportunity for a client to come deeply in touch with who they are—to come *home* to themselves." She says this experience is even more poignant and therapeutic when working with vulnerable populations like the homeless, who are often overwhelmed with the stresses of daily survival. "Being touched and getting *in touch* often go together and the healing quality of this interaction is that it can serve to stimulate hope and the motivation to continue in the face of what can feel like incessant struggle."



Shay Beider's volunteerism has inspired her to build a healing retreat center for children.

Price says volunteering her services to AHAC provides a balance with the research work she does at the university, while also allowing her to stay connected on a personal level. She's drawn to research because she wants to make massage and bodywork accessible to more people, she says, but it's only one of the answers. "Research is one avenue to pursue, but it is not the most direct and immediate route. The purpose of AHAC is to make bodywork [and other complementary modalities] accessible to people who would otherwise have no access to these approaches. It is a grassroots organization focused on direct service. AHAC provides me the opportunity to participate in this level of care."

GROWING THE SEED: SHAY BEIDER

It was one little, frightened girl in a hospital bed who turned the world upside down for Shay Beider eight years ago. Putting herself through college at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and preparing to go to medical school to specialize in pediatrics, Beider was observing at Children's Hospital Los Angeles when she saw a terrified child being readied for surgery. "Something in me at that moment said, 'No. This could be different.' I knew there had to be another way." Beider says she was certain massage could help these children, who not only couldn't understand why these bad things were happening, but who also had a heightened sense of fear and anxiety.

The beginning was the development of a hospital-based massage pediatrics program at Children's Hospital and a hospice-based massage pediatrics program

at Trinity Kids Care, the largest pediatrics hospice in Los Angeles.

Beider's passion eventually led her to start thinking bigger. "After working through these two experiences, I thought I would love to take this to the next level and make this a national or international program, and see pediatric hospitals offer this as part of their standard care, just as they offer physical therapy, occupational therapy, and other kinds of care." The result was Integrative Touch for Kids (ITK), Beider's nonprofit organization that helps develop and/or support gentle massage programs in medical facilities that serve desperately ill children.

Through her nonprofit's work, Beider says she's more in tune with the obstacles preventing massage from more fully and universally integrating into medical facilities—namely money and resistance to change. It was her understanding these roadblocks, along with a commitment to the benefits of complementary healthcare, that prompted Beider and her ITK board of directors to take a leap of faith. While still continuing to consult with hospitals and encourage pediatric massage program development, ITK is now slated to create an integrative healing retreat center in Tucson, Arizona, for children with chronic, acute, and life-limiting illness, and their families.

"It will be the first of its kind in the country," she says. "It will be the integrative healing piece that is still quite a struggle to bring into hospitals." Beider wants to invite physicians and other healthcare professionals to come visit the center to see an integration of therapies, everything from massage, Western medicine,

homeopathy, chiropractic care, and nutrition to meditation, dance therapy, and reiki, as a means to provide best outcomes for sick children. “It will allow us to articulate how this could be practiced.” The plan includes a 2009 pilot project, the results of which will be combined with patient, family, and physician feedback to help shape the development of the retreat center.

Beider says the center is “really the crystallization of a dream.” While the work she does with hospitals and healthcare facilities is undeniably rewarding, there’s something missing in the fact that she can’t develop programs in the fullest sense of how the work can be practiced. The healing retreat will be that realization. “We know that in massage, healing can be optimized in an optimal healing environment. I’m very interested to see if we can create an environment with the best of what massage has to offer and the best of what integrative therapies have to offer with healing environments. We’ll put that together and see what impact we have on children’s lives.”

With an active private massage practice, a growing family, a nonprofit, and the development of a huge project on her plate, Beider still volunteers her time regularly to cancer patients, primarily children, at the University Medical Center Hospital in Tucson. There’s an aspect of giving yourself to another that holds great power, she says. “There’s a different kind of satisfaction that I get when doing volunteer work that’s coming from a purely charitable place. When you do work from that place, where there’s no other vested interest, it’s a very different relationship. Sometimes just to do it for the pure sake of doing it, offering [massage] with no strings attached, I really connect with the essence of what the work is, to the true



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

www.abmp.com/news/volunteer-outreach-opportunities. See what volunteer needs are being requested or submit a call for volunteers on the Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals’ website.

www.ahacseattle.org. In Seattle, the Alternative Healthcare Access Campaign needs a variety of volunteers, including MTs. Contact ahacseattle@gmail.com.

www.heartlandalliance.org. The Marjorie Kovler Center needs Illinois-based massage volunteers to work with torture survivors. Contact Flutra Sahatqija at fsahatqija@heartlandalliance.org.

www.massagetherapyfoundation.org. The Massage Therapy Foundation annually awards not only research grants, but also community service grants directed at programs like those mentioned here.

www.ngoabroad.com. International career and volunteer opportunities.

www.peacecorps.gov. Volunteerism, in more than 70 countries, since 1960.

www.vnsi.org. To access the Visiting Nurse Service in Indiana (mentioned in this article), e-mail Emily Gage at EGage@vnsi.org.

www.volunteermatch.org. Find a match for skills and services you want to donate.

Still can’t find what you’re looking for? Do a simple Google search (www.google.com) for “volunteer massage therapist,” along with a city, state, or specialty, and see what pops up.

essence of nurturing and caring, which really is a manifestation of love.”

**SEEKING THE WHOLE:
MARION MORGAN**

At the Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture in Chicago, a community-based band of volunteer massage therapists work diligently with a sometimes fragile clientele. Torture survivors from around the world find service and respite at the Marjorie Kovler Center, which is part of the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights. About 100 volunteers keep the Kovler wheels turning. Whether it be massage therapy, dental care, referrals to lawyers

to help with asylum, or a doctor to check old wounds, the center has a variety of services for those in need.

Marion Morgan has volunteered at the Marjorie Kovler Center since 2000 and is now the massage therapist coordinator there. She says her initial impetus for volunteering at the center was to fulfill a training requirement at the Chicago School of Massage Therapy. It became something much more when she was immediately intrigued with the work and its impact.

One of only a few dozen torture treatment facilities around the country, the Marjorie Kovler Center helps survivors reclaim their lives and begin healing. Part of that process is bodywork. “Healing the body is as critical as healing the mind,” says

Mary Lynn Everson, senior director. “Because people experience torture in a very physical way, the whole reintroduction of safe touch is very important to their healing. How that’s done and at what pace is really a critical piece of the process.”

Morgan says she thinks, “people who are drawn to massage therapy often have a strong desire to help others. That was definitely true for me. And certainly this work can be highly rewarding in that regard. Ideally, what it does is help the torture survivor regain a sense of trust, connection, and reintegration within themselves and within the community. In helping

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another person make that journey, you also heal part of yourself.”

There are professional benefits to this type of giving, as well. “On a professional level, I think it’s safe to say that working with torture survivors does carry into my work with other clients,” she says. “Hopefully it has enhanced my sensitivity and mindfulness with them and helped me to remember, again and again, the importance of being highly present and aware in every interaction I have with them.” In reality, she says, most people have experienced some kind of trauma in their lives, even if it’s not as intense and horrific as being tortured. “So the goal of bodywork can be similar. You’re still helping people reconnect with, and be more at home in, their bodies.”

When it comes to volunteering, Morgan says it helps push her out of a state of complacency. “I’m grateful for the chance to at least try to be

part of the solution ... In fact, I think I get as much, if not more, out of working with this population than the people receiving treatment.”

Therapists who work with trauma clients need to be ready and trained for certain things, Morgan says. “To a certain degree, I think you have to be willing to examine your own inner barriers and fears, because this work can really throw you some curve balls in that way.” Yet, Morgan says that’s what also makes the work interesting. “It brings you face to face with people who are in a really difficult and wounded place, and you get to accompany them and hopefully help them make the transition back to wholeness.” Ultimately, she says, you must have compassion for the people and passion for the work.

“I have found a real joy in working with this population. Clients are often incredibly grateful and it’s just very moving to build that trust with

them and be part of their healing process. As with most endeavors, the degree of risk and intensity involved in this work is usually commensurate with the rewards it brings. So while it can be very challenging, what you get back in return can be truly transformative and amazing.”

Regardless where charitable service is given, there is compensation, tenfold, for the giver. For recipients, the gift can impact lives in so many ways. Yet, ultimately it’s the compassion and humanity the gift represents that make it so powerful.

Maybe this is your time to contribute. Stop, take a moment, look inside, and see if there’s something you can give back to the world. You might just change a life—even your own. **m&b**

6 *Karrie Osborn is contributing editor for *Massage & Bodywork* magazine. Contact her at karrie@abmp.com.*

NOTE

1. *William Harbaugh, Ulrich Mayr, and Daniel Burghart, “Neural Responses to Taxation and Voluntary Giving Reveal Motives for Charitable Donations,” Science, 316, no. 5831 (June 2007): 1622–25.*



Volunteer Susan Lallak brings joy to her clients at the Abbie Hunt Bryce Home for the Terminally Ill.

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“Believe, when you are most unhappy, that there is something for you to do in the world. So long as you can sweeten another’s pain, life is not in vain.” Helen Keller