

Pathways to Wellness, Inc.

by Cheryl Caruolo, MFA



When you call *Pathways to Wellness* in Boston, you will hear the greeting, "Balance for your Body, Mind & Spirit." Their tagline comes directly from their mission statement and embodies the impact they have had since their inception in 1989.

The *AIDS Care Project*, as it was originally called, first emerged to nurture the primarily gay male population infected by the AIDS epidemic of the late 80's. The initial objective was to offer free acupuncture treatments to those struggling against the HIV virus and AIDS. *Pathways* operated from a rented room of a "Y" building. Their budget, if you can call it that, barely covered rent.

Executive Director, Kristen Porter, explains that the AIDS landscape changed over the decade that followed. "By (the



Acupuncture

year) 2000, one of the challenges was the stigma attached to AIDS, especially for communities of color." The collaborative understood that to continue to serve and provide an improved

quality of life, they had to address the embarrassment and societal cacophony that surrounded the forbidden word. A name change to *Pathways to Wellness* overcame the stigma hurdle while simultaneously opening a doorway to treating others.

Sympathetic to the distressing plight of loved ones and friends interconnected with those battling AIDS, *Pathways* extended its reach to treat the affected as well as the infected individuals and communities.

Perhaps in a natural metamorphosis, it then extended services to help others with potentially fatal diagnoses, such as cancer. Today, anyone, and everyone is received and helped with dignity and compassion. With twenty-five licensed practitioners and about twenty interns *Pathways to Wellness* specializes in Asian therapies. Offered modalities include Shiatsu, Tui Na (Chinese therapeutic massage), and acupuncture of all lineages. *Pathways*

also offers an on-site herbal pharmacy, off-site yoga classes, and other programs such as Smoking Cessation.

Pathways administers programs in almost all Boston-area hospitals and has a unique affiliation with Massachusetts General Hospital. Their practitioners not only offer on-site acupuncture at MGH, but they also assist clients who are receiving chemotherapy treatment in the Infusion Unit. Providing free acupuncture alongside standard treatment is a natural unity of east and west. The melding of conventional and alternative therapies, if only at one facility at a time, is the way to sustainable healthcare options. And at a time when healthcare systems are staggering towards collapse, unprejudiced solutions are critical.

After seeing friends nurtured and supported by *Pathways'* programs and practitioners, Kristen Porter began working as a volunteer - she became the Executive Director in 1990. Witness to the transformation she saw in people who were dying, Kristen was led to study Asian medicine herself. She is a license acupuncturist and Chinese herbalist, though her dedication at the helm of *Pathways* doesn't give her much time to practice her modalities. There is a hint of sadness in her voice when she says that she doesn't work much one-on-one with clients, but she knows her business role is just as vital. "The quality of a moment is so powerful," she states softly.

Like most non-profits, *Pathways* struggles with funding issues. "We've lost almost 75% of our federal funding in the past few years," Kristen reveals without a trace of resentment. Unfortunately, in 2005, complementary medicine was eliminated from the *Ryan White Care Act* resulting in a loss of \$375,000 for *Pathways*. Whether the federal funding cuts speak to the lack of mainstream acceptance of complimentary and alternative care is debatable; what is not in question is that the loss of significant funding usually forces organizations to close. And the economic climate has consistently chipped away at *Pathways'* ability to assist. With sixty people a day, six days a week passing across its

MISSION STATEMENT:

Pathways to Wellness, Inc. is a nonprofit public health organization committed to providing equal access to high quality holistic care. Within a compassionate and empowering environment, *Pathways* provides complementary therapies for clients as an adjunct to Western medical care. Working in partnership with community health centers and organizations, *Pathways* aids in the development of a continuum of care for clients in body, mind and spirit.

threshold, its demise would have resonating impact. But with its fortitude for adapting to change and overcoming obstacles, *Pathways* continues to find innovative ways to respond.

"We initiated a program called 'Share the Care' in which anyone (regardless of their illness, social, or financial profile) can come into the Boston clinic for services. Those who can pay in full do, feeding a sliding scale for those who cannot pay as much, or at all."

Pathways intern clinic in Boston has always offered treatment at \$20 per session. More recently, a new program was introduced offering \$35 acupuncture treatments on Saturdays - in a geographic area where one treatment can cost over \$100, the new program speaks to *Pathways* commitment to make wellness accessible to the masses. The majority of staff practitioners receive payment for their expertise, though Kristen honestly points out that compensation is in the form of a stipend and nowhere near actual cost.

After consideration, contemplation and lots of planning, *Pathways* has joined a strategic alliance with the *South End Community Health Center*, also in Boston. In January 2007, *Pathways* will open a new center as it combines forces with the *South End Community Health Center*. According to Kristen, the collaborative of integrated medicine is the "first east meets west healthcare establishment in Massachusetts." Hopefully it will be the paradigm for a future national healthcare initiative.

One of the most interesting parts of the partnership is the clientele each entity serves. While *Pathways* treats all ages, their clients are primarily adults; conversely, the *South End Community Health Center* treats mostly pediatric and adolescent populations. This coalition presents a real opportunity to educate these impressionable groups about preventable diseases. It is also an exceptional occasion to instill the good healthcare habits that result in a better quality of life. Although the official move doesn't happen until 2007, *Pathways* has already begun teaching the young population of SECHC, engaging in programs such as diabetes education for teenage girls.

Pathways to Wellness is not only Making a Difference in its own community, it is also demonstrating by example how the puzzle pieces of complimentary medicine slide effortlessly into the framework of conventional medicine. And in the end, this amalgamation serves all of humanity.

You can learn more about *Pathways to Wellness*, sign up to receive newsletters, and read about giving opportunities at www.pathwaysboston.org. You can read about the *South End Community Health Center* at www.sehc.org.



Shiatsu

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