

South End's best-kept secret

Pathways to Wellness celebrates 15 years

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It's the only program of its kind in the state. Its unique payment plan has been emulated across the country. Its staff is among the best in the country in their field. Yet for the past 15 years, Pathways to Wellness, above the Mitchell Gold showroom on Berkeley Street, has been the South End's best-kept secret, quietly offering quality low-cost complimentary health care to anyone who needs it.

"Our business is very unique because we're a nonprofit," says Kristen Porter, executive director of Pathways. Pathways is the nation's largest wellness center of its kind, and the only nonprofit one in the area. Its "Share the Care" payment plan ensures that low-cost or free complimentary medical care is available to anyone who needs it: When people pay full price for their services, that money goes back into the center, and helps others who cannot pay full price get care. "People don't know that by choosing Pathways, they're actually helping somebody else," says Porter.

In 1989, a group of volunteer acupuncturists wanted to respond to the growing AIDS crisis among South End gay men and Pathways to Wellness was born soon after. "In our initial stages, we were all volunteers and it was all word of mouth," says Porter, an acupuncturist who has worked with the organization since

its formation. "It was something that nobody else was doing."

And it still is something nobody else is really doing – Pathways has carved out an important niche in the world of holistic care. Since 1990, the center has expanded to incorporate other forms of holistic therapies, as well as a federally funded research department, and now serves more than 400 clients, mostly from the South End. In January 2004, the center expanded and moved to its current location at 142 Berkeley St. Currently, Pathways offers several different



styles of acupuncture, including non-needle acupuncture, which relies on the use of acupuncture points to

stimulate healing. "That's something unique, too, for people who want acupuncture but are either needle-shy or have some other contraindications about it," says Porter.

Pathways also offers yoga classes, shiatsu massage and craniosacral massage therapy. All programs are tailored for individual clients. Pathways also has a Chinese herbal pharmacy on-site and offers consultations and powdered herbal prescriptions designed specifically for the user. "We focus on the whole person," says Porter.

The center does not rely on what Porter called "treatment protocol," which is a kind of checklist that Western medicine tends to use to prescribe treatment for an ill patient. Instead, intake interviews and conversations with patients about myriad issues, from stress to bowel movements, is used to design a treatment plan. "We use an individualized model and each time they come in, they have a treatment



Shiatsu is one of the many services offered at Pathways to Wellness.

specific to them," says Porter.

Because Pathways began as an initiative to elevate the quality of life of AIDS/HIV sufferers and still offers care in that area, much of its focus remains on treating patients with conditions and illnesses that are currently being treated with Western medicine as well. "A lot of the work can be focused on the side effects of Western treatment," says Porter, who adds that a number of Pathways patients are dealing with cancer and treatment of cancer. "Holistic therapies do not cure cancer, but when used in concert with Western medicine, they can dramatically improve the quality of life for the patient," she says.

Western medical practitioners agree. Dr. Anne St. Goar, an internist with Watertown Harvard Vanguard, frequently refers patients to Pathways for complimentary care for musculoskeletal pain, sleep problems, coping with menopause and for dealing with cancer treatment. "I'm a big believer in alternative therapies, I think it can make a big difference in areas that Western medicine can't. I think these modalities can make them feel better," she said, adding that she refers not only patients but friends to Pathways as well. "I get very positive feedback from people who go.

"It's the kind of place that people feel better when they walk in and the practitioners there are high quality practitioners. I think it's a wonderful organization that can help a lot of people."

Despite the glowing reviews and recent relocation to the larger Berkeley Street location, Pathways and its care has been the victim of the recent funding cuts that have AIDS/HIV aid organizations scrambling for money. Severe cuts to the federal Ryan White CARE Act last year has forced Pathways to cut back services and care to those who need it most. Since Aug. 1, 2004, all potential HIV-positive patients are being put on waiting lists for up to eight months. Current HIV/AIDS patients have lost 50 percent of the services they once had and the home-hospice care program has been cut by 50 percent. The home-hospice care program may be eliminated, Porter says, if the organization doesn't get more financial aid to sustain it.

"It's never enough and with cuts and struggling budgets – it's always a struggle," says Porter, who nonetheless remains hopeful. "I think our longevity, given how challenging things have been in the past 15 years for nonprofits, is based in the fact that what we do has real value for people."