

## Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

### Questions for Billie Wahlen

*Raised in Buffalo, and the grandson of a preacher, Billie Wahlen, age 35, has been on a long and winding road to get to his current massage and bodywork practice at the Parkway Center. His massage training was at Irene's Myomassology Institute in Southfield. He is also a skilled herbalist, and has one daughter.*

**Why do you call your practice "healing thru awareness"?**

I have found that people are mostly unaware of their selves, their bodies and their imbalances. When receiving bodywork people become more aware of their bodies and it is through this awareness that they can start to heal. You can't fix what you don't know is broken? Right? People come to me with pain and issues like "It hurts right here, (pointing to shoulder), can you fix it?" During their treatment I find that their low back is pulling especially tight and their hip is twisted. By working on the low back and hip often the shoulder can relax, for example, and people experience relief. During my practice I help people become more aware. When one is more aware, life is better.

**Over the years, I have noticed that oftentimes you wear a turban.**

**Why?**

To keep my hair up. It's really long. Although I have enjoyed the spiritual implications of wearing a turban. Oftentimes, people will bow to me as I walk down the street. Without the turban I usually get asked for cigarettes or spare change. It also helps me remember to be gentle.

I always wanted to grow my hair as a kid, although my Mom wouldn't let me. So when I moved away from home I decided to try and grow it. It would get to a length that was pulling, or hot on my neck, and I'd get frustrated and chop it. Then I met the teachings of Yogi Bhaajan. He said, "keep your hair, it'll give you spiritual strength, keep it tied on top of your head, it works as an antenna, and you want the energy it pulls in to be received by the crown chakra, (energy center). When tied up with cotton cloth the person's energy is focused, and pressure points on the head are stimulated that help

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with clarity of thought, mental acuteness and happiness." He even showed us a biblical reference to wearing cotton around our heads. I tried it and liked it. Sometimes it's like having no hair with it tied up.

**You told me you were raised in Buffalo? Tell us about that, please.**

Yea, I lived in the same house for 18 years with my mom and dad, two older brothers, and my Grandpa who came over everyday to cook and take care of things for us



kids. The town was Williamsville, near Niagara Falls, a suburb. My mom was a high school English teacher for 34 years, and my dad a computer engineer for Fisher Price for his last 10 years of employment.

I was an athlete and a leader. I swam for most of my childhood competitively and was the captain of the swim team. I played soccer and ran long distances cross-country in high school. I ended my athletic epic with running a marathon in Washington DC just before college.

**And your grandfather was a Baptist preacher?**

Yea, my Grandpa, I was named after him (William). He was a very sweet and gentle man. Strongly devoted to his spiritual beliefs and to serving others. He was there everyday to make us breakfast, pack our lunches and send us off to school. He would have dinner on the table for us all at 5:30 every evening so we could eat as a family. Then he would go home to his wife and make dinner for her. For many years he served us that way. I have to say he wasn't the one who turned me off to the Church. He died when I was 17, at the age of 82.

**At what age did you begin going to Grateful Dead concerts, and what influence did they have on you?**

My first Grateful Dead show was at Darien Lake

Amusement park when I was 14, with my brothers... Bob Dylan was opening. It was the beginning of a journey into sacred sound, music, hippie life, and girls who didn't shave. Ha. I also learned to dance. I followed the band and the traveling circus that followed them to over a hundred shows. The music and dancing opened me up to spiritual experiences. I learned that sound can really elevate one to higher states of awareness and to experience our divine self. I was there for the music, not the drugs. The band gave me a way out of society and a way out of the trappings of religion.

**Where did you go to college?**

I tried to study medicine at Michigan State University. I realized that the current allopathic medical model was something I didn't believe in, so I didn't want to invest my time or energy into studying it. I began to learn and search for teachings on holistic medicine, ancient healing practices, the use of herbs, and esoteric healing methods. So in 1992 I had to leave the University to find it.

**Can you walk us through your own evolutionary process, leading you to become a healer?**

As a kid growing up I always wanted to become a doctor. My mom would remind us what we were going to be when we grew up, and I was the doctor in the family. I was always wanting to take care of everyone, including reaching out to the homeless and the less fortunate. I didn't know what it meant to be a doctor and certainly didn't know what field of medicine I was going to practice. I just knew (or thought) that doctors helped people, right? A perspective of an innocent young boy and I wanted to do that.

I didn't study anything related in high school -- just sports, dating, the Grateful Dead, and parties. So I choose a University that was large enough to offer me many options in the field of medicine and being a doctor, as well as being away from New York State, but within a day's driving distance to come home to visit my parents. MSU here I come, oh, plus I had a girlfriend that I wanted to follow to college and she went to U of M. Never saw her again though.

During my meetings with an adviser at MSU, I was told I had to take a couple of years of un-related classes that had nothing to do with medicine, Anatomy, Cadavers, doctors, nutrition, etc. I was given a classification called "no preference student." After one very lame first trimester, I found that partying on campus was more fun than going to classes and much more educational. The second trimester I got into an environmental science class that was really cool. My professor could sing the calls of the birds and he took us around to learn the names of plants and trees, look for insects and cool patterns. My love of plants started.

I also took a class called *American Radical Thought and Literature*. This blew me away! To name a couple of reasons: I learned about the history of Marijuana, its positive use in health care and its ability to be a renewable resource for oil, paper and fuel, and, of course, its suppression.

I begged my advisor to give me a medical class. I was about to throw in the towel on “higher education” although I was pressured by my parents to stay in school. I was unsatisfied with not learning how I was going to fit into our current health care system. I was placed in a senior’s medical ethics course that became the straw that broke the camel’s back. They told me how I couldn’t call my

In 1996, I graduated from Irene’s Myomassology Institute studying esoteric energy healing modalities. The areas of study I was attracted to were shiatsu, Thai massage, Reiki and *Touch for Health*. I learned Polarity Therapy and a bit about the chakra and meridian systems. I wanted to discover more about traditional healing modalities through other cultures’ methods of healing. I knew that in

therapist career. I also worked under the guidance of Dr. Robert Rose, a chiropractor, for two years before I began my private practice in early 2006.

**You have described to me how you became increasingly aware of your intuitive skills as a healer. Can you talk about that?**

I made a decision that has helped me become a unique therapist and helped me get in touch with my gifts as a healer. I use a daily practice of yoga and meditation to clear myself of unwanted negativity and from the absorption of other people’s tension or yuck. I became stronger so I could work long hours doing bodywork through my yoga practice, and I became more intuitive by my meditation practice. I had a way to clear the yuck from me and from what I collected from others.

So I decided to go deep with people. I get into their “stuff” and can sometimes experience other people’s pain. It’s a gift of empathy I’ve learned. I like to go deep with people in therapy sessions because really cool releases happen in them, and I can feel that, too. I used to be afraid of my sensitivity, of my intuitive thoughts, my feelings, and the sense of just knowing something. But through practicing enough, I found that I can use this gift to help others, I use it like a map in my body to tell me where to work in the underlying issues of my clients. It’s really handy. I see it as a bit of a sacrifice, too.

I realized that the current allopathic medical model was something I didn’t believe in, so I didn’t want to invest my time or energy into studying it. I began to learn and search for teachings on holistic medicine, ancient healing practices, the use of herbs, and esoteric healing methods.

patients by first name, how they were just a number, they explained how I had to cut my patients off if they talked about anything besides their symptoms, like things that mattered to them, including grief, emotional challenges or relationship issues. I was then to match their symptoms to a chart provided to me by the Big Pharma and prescribe them the correct drug. I was scared of the pharmaceutical industry and definitely did not want to work for them.

It became clear to me through studying the history of our country’s health care system how I was going to become a middleman to the patients and the drugs, and that I needed to go to another country to study real healing methods... I needed to go back 100 years to learn real healing methods. How was I going to do that?

I began my journey...

I dropped everything I had known. Gave away my belongings, got in my car and drove west to “discover” real, true, healing. I learned a lot on that journey of 3 years wandering, about Native American use of herbs, incense and prayer. And about Paganism, drum circles, fire ceremonies, esoteric healing powers, and shamanism. I searched to apprentice with someone who still had the knowledge of the old ways.

I met Michael Cottingham, a very knowledgeable man who could identify and prescribe plant medicine in the field. It was very exciting to be with him. He taught me about the desert plants in the wilderness around New Mexico and Arizona. We went on herb walks where we sat with the plants, heard about their chemistry and healing properties. I learned how to extract medicine, make tinctures, herbal formulas, salves, lip balms, and teas from the plants. I followed the journey to being an herbalist, and brought my knowledge to Michigan to be with my newly born daughter and to start a business.

I started Starlight Herbs. An herbal extract company focusing on desert herbs and shamanic plant medicine. It grew to the point of needing to leap into the health food markets. Insurance was so expensive I would have to sell so many bottles. I would be spending my time being an herbal laboratory and factory, not a healer. How was I going to use my compassionate nature? And being an herbalist meant being a doctor of sorts and I didn’t have training to prescribe herbs, so back to the thought of schooling.

I lived with a quadriplegic in trade for rent for my first two years in the Ann Arbor area; this was a great experience. I was in the role of direct care with a patient and got to know him, not just treat his symptoms. I put him to bed every night and got him up into his chair every morning. I helped with feeding, bathing, and even his elimination needs. This was far better than working in the nursing home in New Mexico where I was slave labor on a mission to clean butts. But both were satisfying as I did get to know who I was working with, and had a relationship with them. I could get close and help them. Funny how little I got paid, and how much more help I was able to provide them than the doctor who got paid a lot and only spent 3 minutes with them, gave them a drug and never even knew their names.

I moved on and started working for the health food supplement store within Seva’s restaurant, before they changed it into a wine and liquor bar, and then for Complete Spectrum (1997-2002) distributing herbs, teas, supplements, incense and gifts to Michigan-area health food and book stores. I learned about how to have a business in health supplements, and the retail side of it.

the Orient they use herbs and bodywork when people get sick. But getting to the Orient has its challenges, so Irene’s school was somewhat conveniently located in Southfield.

**You indicated to me that dealing with boundaries was a pivotal step in your growth as a healer?**

Yeah, when I got out of massage school I was very confident in my abilities to be a good therapist. People loved my work. I called it intuitive energy healing. Although I would be exhausted for 3 days from *one* session. I didn’t understand what was happening to me. I went to my teachers and fellow therapists and everyone said I needed boundaries. I need to learn to protect myself. I studied using crystals, wearing metal on my forearms, doing visualization techniques, etc. Nothing made any difference. But I knew inside I could take better care of myself. I was a coffee and tobacco user and I was also liking an occasional drink.

I made a decision that ending up being another major hallmark in my life in 2002. I quit tobacco, coffee and alcohol. A sacrifice to the universe you might say, just like sending myself off to wander 10 years prior. What I found I couldn’t have ever imagined... I found Kundalini Yoga.

**I know you’ve been a student of Yogi Bhajan. What have been the gifts for you of your involvement with those teachings?**

Yogi Bhajan’s teachings of Kundalini yoga, Sikhism, chanting, meditation and humanology have sent me on a path of purity and happiness, and to fulfill my potential or destiny. I cleansed my aura, my system and my mind through practicing his teachings. I found a community of healers, teachers and leaders. I gained confidence, healed many relationships and became stronger.

I used to be afraid of my sensitivity, of my intuitive thoughts, my feelings, and the sense of just knowing something. But through practicing enough, I found that I can use this gift to help others, I use it like a map in my body to tell me where to work in the underlying issues of my clients. It’s really handy. I see it as a bit of a sacrifice, too.

I was rewarded by finding Relaxstation after sacrificing tobacco to the Gods and began my full time massage



**Do your clients come for massage, or spiritual healing, or what?**

A bit of both I guess. I like to be an example of walking my path of healing, spiritual practices, eating right and doing good work in the world. I think my clients appreciate that about me. It keeps me on my toes, too.

My clients ask for help with lifestyle changes, as well for a good deep massage. So I learn along with them in their process of healing, reducing stress and getting to the cause of major concerns they may have.

**What modalities do you incorporate into your practice?**

I do deep tissue massage and Life Coaching. I also use stretching techniques and some Thai Massage. The intuitive stuff comes when I least expect it. And I try to encourage a healthier lifestyle for my clients.

**What would you like to learn about next, to incorporate into your work?**

I am wanting to learn osteopathic manipulations as I find often that body blocks are in the skeletal system. But I don’t know how I’ll incorporate that into my work, as one needs a license to do those manipulations.

What I am also excited to learn and bring into my practice is Ayurveda bodywork techniques and counseling. The healing system from ancient India has so much to offer us to balance ourselves and live happier and healthier.



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### Questions for Kelly Kempter

*Kelly Kempter, 38, was raised in Ann Arbor, and she has years of gymnastics and dance in her background. Trained in massage at Irene's Myomassology Institute, she's also been integrating Thai Massage into her practice. She and her two business partners run Kaizen Healing Arts. Her daughter, Jahri, is 12 years old.*

**Where were you raised, Kelly?**

I was born and raised in Ann Arbor. Growing up as a hippie child on the Old West Side, I had a loosely structured childhood. At 18, I moved to New York City for college and lived there for six years, and then returned to Ann Arbor to raise a family. I think growing up in Ann Arbor has given me an innate openness and appreciation for all things liberal, esoteric, natural, and organic without feeling a need to actively seek these things for myself.

**Looking back, have you been a naturally kinesthetic person since childhood?**

Very much so. I was an extremely active child, constantly moving and experiencing life through my body. I remember whirling, dancing, and flipping through grocery store aisles and parks alike. For the record, you can still occasionally spot me repeating such antics. Although my parents encouraged physical activity, I was so attracted to movement, that it was unnecessary.

As a shy youngster, I was often aware of physically pulling in when I was uncomfortable by hunching my upper back and drawing my shoulders forward and up. I now realize that this is a natural response to stress, but what's notable is my keen awareness that it was happening, even at an early age. I can remember many times wondering what I should do with my arms when I stood still. I think there was some discomfort in standing still that perhaps influenced my strong desire to move all the time.

I have always had a knack for observing and imitating the physical habits of others. This innate ability greatly contributes to my practice as a massage therapist. As a child, imitating the stance and movement habits of others was a constant pastime of mine. I didn't understand, until recent years, what a gift it is to be fully present in one's body, and that for many people, connecting with their body is a great challenge.

**What sports did you like and play when you were a girl?**

Although I spent most waking hours moving my body in some kind of physical play, including running, biking, swimming, hiking, skiing, skating, and dancing, I chose to devote myself fully to one, and only one, pursuit: gymnastics.



### Questions for Billie Whalen (*continued*)

Yes! I have been involved in using Sacred Sound to heal others and ourselves. With other members of the community we meet in circle to share songs, mantras, chanting, as well as play sacred instruments like singing bowls, flutes, Peruvian Whistling Vessels, rattles, etc. I lead Gong and chanting meditations too. We set our intention towards healing and let the sound vibrations overcome us, absorb into us and cleanse us. The meetings are very elevating! I have brought people together to experience Sacred Sound during monthly meetings at various people's houses. Everyone has had very profound experiences.

**You teach Kundalini Yoga in town, too?**

Yes, I am currently teaching Yoga workshops at various studios. Kundalini Yoga consists of exercises or postures (Asana), combined with special breathing (Pranayama), hand and finger gestures (Mudra), body locks (Bhanda), chanting (Mantra), and meditation, together and in sequence to create exact and specific effects. The best parts of the workshops are the Gong Meditations at the end of class when you lay down and let the sound of the Gong overwhelm you. It's really high!

**What else would you like to share with us?**

My practice is located on the third floor of the Parkway Center known as the Castle Remedies building. I also have a small web presence at [www.michigankundaliniyoga.com](http://www.michigankundaliniyoga.com) for more information about yoga classes and workshops. If you are interested in the Sacred Sound Circles, email me at [starbillie@gmail.com](mailto:starbillie@gmail.com) for our upcoming meetings, always free of charge.

I will be continuing to bring people together in our community through sound, meditation, healing and vegetarian food. I will also be promoting concerts and workshops from other gifted musicians and healers. Let me know if you'd like to help.

**Thanks, Billie!**  
Thank you, Bill!

###

Where ever I found myself, I did gymnastics. For me gymnastics extended far beyond the gym into every moment of my life. If I could create a new gymnastics apparatus with objects at the scene, I would begin making up tricks and routines. If not, I was upside down or otherwise exploring gravity in creative ways. I invented several other "sports" in those years: picnic-table-nastics, brick-nastics, trampoline-nastics, water-nastics, you get the idea. I spent most of every summer devoted to choreographing and practicing routines on a variety of homemade gymnastics events.

**What did your 12 years in gymnastics as a young person contribute to you?**

My years as a gymnast instilled in me a multitude of skills, ethics, aches, and pains, from discipline to an uneven pelvis. Devotion to gymnastics gave me a flexible, healthy, and strong body, great balance, a good work ethic, a sense of camaraderie, several sprained ankles, a love of swinging my body through space, an introduction to dance, a separated shoulder, an ability to incorporate both verbal and demonstrated instructions into my own body, a multitude of ripped calluses on my palms, precision, a personal understanding of gravity, a comfort in being upside down, bravery, a drive to create, and a sense of pride.

**And you were a dancer, as well?**

I still am a dancer, and feel that I will always be in some regard. Graduating from high school marked the end of my years as a gymnast. After moving to New York City to attend college, with no structured outlet for all of my physical energy, I began to realize how much I missed moving my body. In an attempt to remedy the situation I began to take modern dance classes at several studios in the city and also at Hunter College. I quickly fell in love with dance and soon thereafter fell in love with the small, family-like dance department at Hunter. The Hunter dance program is unique in that it is non-exclusive, and aspires foremost to foster creativity in the students. I dedicated myself to dancing,



of dance in my everyday life, whether it is watching the movement of another, tuning into my own body in a moment of stillness, or dancing in my kitchen while I cook dinner, I am dancing. Dance is and will always be a part of me.

thus setting in motion a formula for a long term chronic problem which plagued me for many years to come. Eventually, Dorothy Vislocky saw my struggles and began to work with me for free. My sessions with Dorothy consisted of both hands-on work on my fascia, as well as posture and movement retraining. She helped me to understand my body on a new and deeper level. I remember leaving a challenging session with her and feeling like I had to relearn the simple act of walking. I broke down in tears and frustration as I was crossing Central Park because I realized that for so many years I had been moving in a way that was detrimental to my health. I focused on strengthening the muscles that were weak, stretching muscles that were too short, and bringing my awareness to the present moment to analyze and correct my posture and movements.

I also remember during that time, beginning to experiment with giving and receiving bodywork with another dancer in the program. Because our classes were so hands-on; and we were encouraged to study using tactile and kinesthetic methods, this was a natural part of the learning process for us. By this time I was already sold on receiving massage, but this was the first time I remember enjoying *giving* massage.

**And at what point did you decide to become a massage therapist, and why?**

When my daughter, Jahri, was born, I dedicated myself wholly to mothering. As a single mother from the time of her infancy, parenting was a full time venture with enormous responsibilities, and I had no energy left for other endeavors, such as pursuing my own passions. As she grew, I had many thoughts and ideas of vocations that I could pursue and eventually I decided to create a database where I would list and research different career paths. My database contained several general career tracks of interest, including the healing arts, dance related vocations, various facets of teaching, several bodywork methods, childbirth related occupations, and social work. I then listed more specific options and began to research what would be involved in pursuing each of them. My specific list contained dance therapy, social work, physical therapy, life coaching, massage therapy, acupuncture, Rolfing, and more. I set a deadline for myself, by which time I would need to decide upon a career path. As the deadline approached I realized that I would need to just make a decision to pursue *something*, and that it would need to be something doable. It would need to be a path that would fit into my life, fit my budget, match my interests and strengths, and not compromise my ability to mother Jahri. Pursuing massage therapy increasingly seemed to be a great place to start and I was thrilled to finally get started.

**You mentioned to me that it was in dance that you took your first anatomy and physiology classes, and that you loved them. Tell us more.**

The Anatomy and Kinesiology course was a requirement for all dance majors at Hunter. Most students dreaded the class but I found myself excited to begin to understand on an intellectual level what I think I had understood on a visceral level all of my life; how the body works and moves. My teacher, Dorothy Vislocky, was the founder of the Hunter College Dance Department, which was created with minimal funds and against all odds. She was a demanding teacher, yet she took the time to help us to understand and integrate what we were learning. Dorothy also taught the Improvisation class where I was first introduced to meditation. In addition, she was a talented body worker who had a deep understanding of the myofascial system. She was an inspiration to me in countless ways and I consider her to be my most influential teacher and mentor.

In Anatomy and Kinesiology, Dorothy taught us about the physical structures of the body, focusing on the bones, joints, muscles and related soft tissue. From there, we went on to learn to assess details regarding the complexities of human movement. I was captivated and fascinated by the miracle of life and all that comes together inside of us to give us form and move us through space.

**And how did you get introduced to massage and bodywork?**

I received my first massage from another dance teacher at Hunter College, David Capps, who is also a talented massage therapist. I attended a short introductory workshop on massage taught by David. The main reason I wanted to attend was to receive massage. It turned out that I learned an important lesson in that class. I still remember how surprised I was when my partner expressed that she sensed when I was massaging her from a physically uncomfortable position and that the quality of my touch was diminished. This information ended up being something that guides my everyday practice and will surely add to the longevity of my massage career.

Around that time, I fell on my tailbone which resulted in sudden and severe sciatica. I had always pushed through my pain, and this was no different. I continued all my activities, without giving my body time off to heal,

was a full time venture with enormous responsibilities, and I had no energy left for other endeavors, such as pursuing my own passions. As she grew, I had many thoughts and ideas of vocations that I could pursue and eventually I decided to create a database where I would list and research different career paths. My database contained several general career tracks of interest, including the healing arts, dance related vocations, various facets of teaching, several bodywork methods, childbirth related occupations, and social work. I then listed more specific options and began to research what would be involved in pursuing each of them. My specific list contained dance therapy, social work, physical therapy, life coaching, massage therapy, acupuncture, Rolfing, and more. I set a deadline for myself, by which time I would need to decide upon a career path. As the deadline approached I realized that I would need to just make a decision to pursue *something*, and that it would need to be something doable. It would need to be a path that would fit into my life, fit my budget, match my interests and strengths, and not compromise my ability to mother Jahri. Pursuing massage therapy increasingly seemed to be a great place to start and I was thrilled to finally get started.

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choreographing, attending performances, rehearsing, teaching, studying, and immersing myself in all things related to dance.

After college, upon moving back to Ann Arbor, I joined Jesse Richard's dance and musical theater company, Hundredth Monkey, where I further expanded my repertory and skills. I enjoyed and still cherish the close knit relationships I formed as a member of Hundredth Monkey. I was a company member for five years and have subsequently rehearsed and performed sporadically with other local choreographers, most notably Suzanne Willets-Brooks and People Dancing. My last performance was this past June, and I'm not sure how I will incorporate dance into my life in the coming months and years. As long as I am regularly moving my body and connecting with movement in a meaningful, creative, conscious, and healthy way, I feel a sense of fulfillment in my relationship to dance. If I take the time to focus on the daily expression

I find that my clients are some of the most interesting, driven, strong, lovely people I know and it's a pleasure getting to know each of them on so many levels.

**Where were you trained? And how do you feel about your training?**

I received my training at Irene's Myomassology Institute (IMI), in Southfield. I was attracted to the school because I saw that it was compatible with my beliefs about the mind-body-spirit connection as it relates to health and all of life. I believe that true and lasting health is achieved through the balance of all of the body's systems and that the way that this is attained is specific to each individual. IMI is committed to exposing the student to a variety of modalities; from Polarity, Yoga, and Reiki to Trigger Point Therapy, Myofascial Release, Shiatsu and Thai



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### Questions for Kelly Kempter (*continued*)



Message. This multi-disciplinary approach is not only invaluable in helping clients to heal, but allows students to focus on particular areas of interest. In researching schools I was inspired when I read about the founder of IMI, Irene Gauthier. I was touched to learn that she too had been a single mother, and had successfully raised four children while simultaneously pursuing her passions for learning, healing, and teaching. The fact that Irene, at age 86, is still teaching and treating clients, bears witness to her dedication. IMI has a part-time program which demonstrates a willingness to help all people attain their dreams. I saw this as a perfect fit with my life as a single working mother. For me, the engraving at the entrance sealed the deal; "The essence of our being is love."

I had some amazing, inspiring, and dedicated teachers, such as Randy Fillion who introduced me to Thai massage, and Kit Bruce, who was my weekly hands-on instructor. With plenty of hours working in the student clinic, I felt well prepared to work on the public. The curriculum was broad, giving me a great knowledge base. However, I often felt that the program was not demanding enough. I remedied this by challenging myself in a variety of ways. For example, I created a set of study cards with detailed sketches of individual muscles. In essence, attending massage school was just the beginning of my training. I continue to learn and grow with each massage I give.

**And how long have you been working as a massage therapist? Tell us a bit about your practice, what it's called, who your partners are.**

I began school in 2003, and since I opted for the two-year program, and because of the way the program is structured, I was about 75% done with the program after the first year. At that point I began charging a minimal amount (the same as one paid for a massage at the student clinic), which marked the beginning of my massage practice. At the time I had an office in my home. In 2005 I joined with Alyssa Schreiber, also a massage therapist, and Sara Alrawi, a naturopathic physician specializing in

acupuncture, in creating Kaizen Healing Arts. Our warm and healing space is located in the Kerrytown area, above the People's Food Coop. Kaizen Healing Arts aspires to bring vibrant health and wellness to our community through a variety of healing modalities.

**Are you enjoying your practice, and how is it going?**

I love working with and through my body in this way. I often look forward to giving massage. It's a wonderful way for me to center myself and be fully present in the moment. People are always appreciative of my work and that feels rewarding to me. I find that my clients are some of the most interesting, driven, strong, lovely people I know and it's a pleasure getting to know each of them on so many levels. Since I split my schedule between massage and my research job at U of M, I feel quite blessed by the balanced life I lead.

**In your own mind, what is the difference between a massage therapist, a bodyworker, and a healer? Are you a healer, and if so, what does that mean?**

**If not, do you aspire to be one?**

In my mind, a massage therapist and a bodyworker differ in that a massage therapist is focused on treating soft tissues, such as muscles, ligaments, fascia, and tendons, while a bodyworker has a broader range of training and is aiming to affect other bodily and energetic systems. I've mostly thought of this in the terms defined by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, which has two separate exams, one for massage therapy and one for massage therapy and bodywork. The latter requires an additional basic knowledge of Eastern philosophies and other somatic techniques. I chose to become nationally certified in therapeutic massage and bodywork (NCTMB), rather than only in massage therapy (NCTM).

In my mind, a healer is defined in looser, more esoteric terms. I think of a healer as a wise practitioner with many years of experience; one who consciously or unconsciously calls on a higher power to bring health to their patients. I believe that all of us in the healing arts have moments when healing happens, and thus in that moment, we act as healers. Perhaps we are healers-in-training or aspiring healers. However, for a true and seasoned healer, these moments become the norm rather than the exception. I consider myself to be an aspiring healer. If I am blessed, after many years of dedicated learning, growing, and practicing, perhaps one day I will be viewed as a healer.

**You told me that often you feel better after you have given a massage. Please talk about that.**

I often feel rejuvenated after giving a massage or two or even five. There have been plenty of times when I have felt better after giving a massage than I did before it began. For example, if I have a headache before a session, it usually

goes away during the session. I've often wondered why this would be the case. I think it has to do with focusing on another, being present in the moment, and an exchange of energy that balances both people involved.

**Do you find that you absorb the energy, including the negative energy, sometimes, of your clients, from working in such a hands-on way with them?**

Not at all; it's interesting because they warned us about that in massage school and you hear all kinds of stories about therapists absorbing negativity and pain from their clients. For example, other therapists have reported that after working on someone with an injured shoulder, the therapist's shoulder began to hurt. I've heard this type of story repeatedly, but I've never experienced it myself. I wonder if it's because I don't really believe in negative energy coming from a person physically, and I just don't give it that kind of power. In addition, I enter each session with a little prayer which sets the tone; and I end each session with a deep sense of gratitude for the session, the person, and the energy that we have shared.

**What is really important to you, as a massage therapist, in terms of boundary issues?**

I aim to be respectful, professional and warm in every interaction. I like to be in communication with my clients and to solicit feedback from them so that I can tailor the session and future sessions to their needs. I try to tune into the person in front of me and get a sense of their comfort level and preferences regarding massage. Each person is unique and what may be uncomfortable for one person may not bother another.

Even if I'm working with my own mother, I treat the session as I would for any other client; by keeping

... A massage therapist and a bodyworker differ in that a massage therapist is focused on treating soft tissues, such as muscles, ligaments, fascia, and tendons, while a bodyworker has a broader range of training and is aiming to affect other bodily and energetic systems.

appointments, beginning and ending on time, honoring her process, style, and needs, not engaging in unnecessary conversation, and helping her to feel comfortable with the draping, amount of pressure, temperature etc. I find that it's easy to let boundaries get fuzzy when working with a family member or a close friend. However, I consciously guard against this by directing my full attention to my client before, during, and after each session because ultimately my practice is a service to others. Another important aspect of boundaries is the state of my own mental and emotional health. I believe part of my job is to explore and know myself by reflecting upon and analyzing my own thoughts and actions.

**You told me that you enter each of your sessions with a little prayer. Please tell us about that.**

It's a simple but profound prayer that I came up with some years ago: "Heal me, heal him/her."

**You went to Thailand earlier this year to study Thai massage. Tell us about that. And how much of your practice, now, is Thai massage?**

I studied Thai Massage in Northern Thailand at ITM (Institute of Thai Massage) under Chongkol Setthakorn, a respected master. My adventure to Thailand was a profound period of leaps-of-faith, growth, exploration, and newness.



I am deeply fascinated by Thai massage, both as a giver and as a receiver. Traditional Thai massage is often described as “lazy man’s yoga” because the practitioner moves the receiver’s body into a variety of yoga poses throughout the session. The session is performed on a floor mat and through the client’s clothes. The technique utilizes deep compression, point pressure and stretching performed in a gentle rhythmic movement style to balance the energy in the sen lines. These lines are similar to those in the Chinese meridian system but also incorporate aspects of Ayurvedic medical theory. The treatment, which typically lasts ninety minutes or more, creates an effective cleansing of the body that continues for days.

After returning from Thailand I made it easy for clients to try Thai massage at a reduced price. Many people tried it and won’t go back to the table; others found that they like to alternate between Thai and table massage. Currently, Thai massage constitutes about half of my practice. The only part I don’t enjoy is taking down and setting up my massage table. Maybe someday I will have a separate room dedicated to Thai massage.

**You mentioned to me that you would be interested in learning more about Roling at some point in the future? Why?**

In short, I have a lot of respect for Roling and the work of Ida Rolf. Also known as Structural Integration, Roling addresses the balance of the body in relation to gravity, which reminds me of many of the lessons I’ve learned or been introduced to as a dancer. I am attracted to the Roling focus on manipulating the myofascial system as well. A lot of my work on the table is directed toward releasing the myofascia and I find it to be extremely effective in realigning the body and absolving pain. Delving more deeply into understanding the subtleties of the myofascial system is an exciting prospect for me. Roling is said to be capable of initiating profound changes in the body. I imagine the Rolfer’s hands to be finely tuned and able to

Perhaps we are healers-in-training or aspiring healers. However, for a true and seasoned healer, these moments become the norm rather than the exception. I consider myself to be an aspiring healer. If I am blessed, after many years of dedicated learning, growing, and practicing, perhaps one day I will be viewed as a healer.

discern slight differences in tissue. I think I have developed palpation skills but I like the idea of honing them further.

**Are there other complementary modalities you would also like to integrate into your practice, in the future?**

I do keep and carry a running list of modalities that I am interested in pursuing. In addition to deepening my knowledge of the methods that I already either practice or have a basic knowledge of, such as Thai Massage, Shiatsu, and Myofascial release, I would like to explore other techniques such as Kinesis Myofascial Integration (a descendant of Roling), Hot Stone Massage, Tuina (finger acupuncture), Trager Work, and Ashiatsu Massage (also called barefoot massage).

**How interested are you, or not, in the more esoteric kinds of healing work, such as Reiki?**

I am acutely aware of feeling a variety of energy patterns when I perform my hands-on work. This fascinates me and I am drawn to learning more. I have received my Reiki attunement and I do practice Reiki at times. I have no doubts about the effects our energy system has on our health. To me all work can be energetic in nature. However, in general, I haven’t been completely satisfied with any of the explanations or theories I’ve been exposed to regarding how and why this is so. The researcher in me, the part of me that wants clear, concise, provable explanations thinks that we don’t yet have the technology to answer the many questions energy work provokes. At this time in my life I don’t feel compelled to formally explore energy work through continuing education. I still feel there is so much to learn about the structure and mechanical function of the body. I imagine that as I grow

as a body worker, energy work will become increasingly important to me as a powerful healing modality.

**I see that you’ve been leading a workshop on Couples Massage, with Alyssa Schreiber. How is that going, and what is interesting about that work?**

We offered one class in the fall and are about to offer another. We are hoping to refine and develop our class and offer it at regular intervals. We also talk about the possibilities of offering other classes. We believe everyone is born knowing touch as the primary channel of communication and connection with the world, yet people

Even if I’ve worked with someone for a long time, I am still discovering things about him or her and about me in every session. One thing I do which keeps me engaged is to select a weekly theme for my massages.

have forgotten how vital touch is to our sense of wellbeing. It takes only a little willingness, time, and awareness to bring the power of touch back into our relationships through shared massage. We are excited about the class and have put a lot of work into creating a workbook and developing a class that makes sense for non-therapists. We feel that partner massage is a wonderful way to create and maintain a profound connection with people in one’s life.

**Do you have a family?**

I live with my daughter, Jahri, who just turned 12. Her presence in my life has profoundly affected me in countless ways. She is an intense ball of energy and a daily inspiration to me. My mom and my sister also both live in Ann Arbor and they are an important part of family life for both Jahri and me. The four of us lived together in my mom’s house (along with a variety of renters) for Jahri’s first eight years and we still have regular family dinners and take vacations together.

I recently became engaged to an amazingly solid, caring, and dedicated man, who has three bright, creative, thoughtful and all together enjoyable children. We plan to get married next summer and subsequently merge our households, so I know there will never be a dull moment in the road ahead.

**What do you like least about your work? And what is hardest about your work?**

The most challenging part of my work is the business aspect, particularly in the area of advertising. I think that I’m actually reasonably good at it and driven to do it, but I don’t enjoy it. There are so many details to keep track of, so many to-do lists, so many ways to reach people, and the work never ends. I sometimes wonder whether my client load would change at all if I didn’t do any outreach. Word of mouth is definitely my biggest advertising boon. However, I do think having a professional, well designed business card, brochure, and website is important. I am grateful to

have my partners, Alyssa and Sara, because these tasks are easier and more enjoyable to approach as a team.

**What do you love most about your work as a massage therapist and bodyworker?**

I am lucky to have landed here and to be on this journey. Being a bodyworker fits me well and feels like home. I think massage is one of the most profound and therapeutic healing methods. I love giving massage and I love receiving it. Often, when I am grounded in the present moment, focused on the space between my body and the recipient’s body, I experience a deep sense of connection with all life. I feel exceedingly blessed.

**Anything you wish to add?**

Through bodywork, I’ve discovered a whole world to delve into. Some therapists may feel bored and stuck in a routine, but I find the entire experience interesting. Even if I’ve worked with someone for a long time, I am still discovering things about them and about me in every session. One thing I do which keeps me engaged is to select a weekly theme for my massages. During my first session each Monday, I silently petition for a focus and this becomes my central motif for the week. Weekly themes I have used in the past range from a focus on a specific technique, the breath, my body being relaxed, or flow, to giving massage with a sense of gratitude, or an aim for my client to attain better posture, or an awareness of the music, or with my eyes closed. I investigate this theme in a variety of ways while giving massages for the week. This is a simple and fun way for me to explore the many layers of bodywork.

**Thanks, Kelly.**


Thank you, Bill. It’s been a great experience to reflect on these thought-provoking questions.

###

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## Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

### Questions for Brian Cochell

*Brian Cochell, 36, worked as a kindergarten teacher before becoming a massage therapist. He was trained at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy and he is now working there part-time as a Teacher's Aide. His massage practice is located at In Touch Therapeutic Massage. He is the father of two small children, Owen and Lucy.*

**Where were you raised, Brian?**

I was raised in St. Clair Shores, Michigan.

**You and some of the people we're including in this feature were trained at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy. When did you complete your course work there?**

I graduated in fall of 2005.

**And you're now also working there as a Teacher's Aide? Please tell us about that.**

I am responsible for helping out in demonstrations, helping students with techniques, and classroom management. I also provide guidance and support for the students. I help out in preparations and attendance for the instructor.

**In your childhood, you have any inkling that you would be in this line of work?**

I never really had any thought about massage or even any interest in the medical field. I always tried being a helpful and caring person. I feel that these traits have proven to be helpful as I grow as a massage therapist.

**Were you a good athlete?**

I was alright. I played mostly baseball. I probably would have played longer except I wasn't that good at hitting the ball. I also enjoyed playing football and hockey. That was mostly with kids from the neighborhood. It was never really organized -- just to have some fun and stay out of trouble.

**What positions did you play in baseball and football?**

In baseball, I played all over, but mostly in center field. There was one summer I was a pitcher, but that didn't last long. In football, I was the receiver or the safety.

**Do you have brothers and sisters?**

I was an only child. I had no one to blame when things went wrong in the house.

**I know you attended a few different colleges, and lived in a few different places. Tell us about your life path, before you became a massage therapist, please.**

After graduating high school, I went to Lawrence Tech in Southfield. There I studied Architecture for 2 years before I moved out to Ypsilanti. I then registered at Eastern Michigan in Education. It was here that I met the mother



of my children, Anne. When she graduated, before I did, we moved to Florence, in South Carolina. There I went to a college called Francis Marion University. I continued to

Seeing the big picture is very helpful in massage... If you are trying to change muscle memory, and the habits of the client, and helping them find balance, it is probably not going to happen overnight.

study education. I only could stay there for one semester because Florence wasn't the place for me. So I moved to sunny Charleston, South Carolina. I enrolled in my 4<sup>th</sup> college and finally graduated from the College of Charleston with a B.S. in Education in the fall of 2000. If I can give any advice, only transfer once, if you must, because it is tough losing credits because you can only take so many

with you. Repeating classes gets kind of boring. Then we moved back to Michigan and I started teaching Kindergarten at a private school in Ann Arbor.

**You told me that before becoming a massage therapist, you worked as a kindergarten teacher. Please tell us about that.**

Teaching was great. I loved working with the students. The best thing about working with kindergarteners was their ability to not let things keep them down. If you had to reprimand a student, there would be a moment of time where the student might be upset. When it was over, the student would get up and be totally cool with the other students and with you. I wish we could maintain this ability as adults. It was also nice to have positive energy from the moment you walk into school until you left. Children are an endless fountain of positive energy and attitude. If only the rest of the job was as rewarding as the time I spent with the students.

**What skills do you get to bring from being a kindergarten teacher to working with people as a massage therapist?**

The most important one for me is working with people. When I taught, I had to think about the twenty or so students and all of their individual needs. That was also helpful with parents and the faculty. Now I get to take that focus down to a one-on-one and it is much easier. Another important skill is the ability to look down the road and set a plan and goal and help you to attain it. Kindergarten students change so much during that year, but when you break the year into weeks you get a much different picture. For two days a student could add 2+2, then all of a sudden they can not tell you the answer. It is like three steps forward, one step back. Seeing the big picture is very helpful in mas-

sage as well. If you are trying to change muscle memory, habits of the client, and helping them find balance, it is probably not going to happen overnight. Setting a plan and following through will help you reach your goals.

**You told me that your ex-wife played a part in your deciding to become a massage therapist... Why did you become a massage therapist?**

I needed a change in careers and I was looking for something I could also supplement my income with. Anne was actually the one that planted the idea in my mind. So I thought I would go and give it a try. As it happened, I really enjoyed learning about the body and found it fascinating.

**How did you feel about your training at AAIMT?**

I thought I got an excellent education at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy. The school provides you with the foundation to build the rest of your practice off of. They start off at the cellular level and work their way



through body systems, bones, muscles, and eventually massage techniques. The whole time learning how massage effects these subjects. From there, you have the basic understanding of what massage is and how it is going to work to use as a stepping stone for different types of modalities.

**You told me that once you began the massage therapy training program, that it was the “actual physicality of doing massages” that got you into it. Please elaborate.** The book work was fun. The last time I had learned about a cell was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. So it was a challenge. The putting all the information together was the tough part, until I started working on people, and feeling how it all came together. Only when I could feel the muscles and palpate them was I able to put the cerebral part of the massage together with the hands-on part, and get a true understanding of what I was really doing for the client. I also could start to use different techniques to be more effective in engaging the muscle tissue.

**Has it been a learning process for you to know how not to absorb the energy, including sometimes the negative energy, of your clients? Has that ever been an issue for you, or not?**

When I first started out, I taught in the mornings and massaged in the afternoon. I would find myself really spent with no energy on the days I massaged. After talking with co-worker friends, they helped me by educating me and giving me techniques to stop the transfer of negative energy.

Only when I could feel the muscles and palpate them was I able to put the cerebral part of the massage together with the hands-on part, and get a true understanding of what I was really doing for the client.

**What is really important to you, as a massage therapist, in terms of boundary issues?** I take this topic very seriously. Being a male teacher, I would never allow myself to be in a position that could be taken in the wrong way. In massage, I take the same care in my approach to my work. I always keep my draping appropriate and to never allow a situation to get out of hand. I keep my massages to a strictly professional level.

**You mentioned to me that you feel that you are “intuitive when it comes to people”... please talk about how that plays out in your bodywork.** I feel that I am able to read people’s emotions and attitudes quite clearly. I use this same sensitivity when it comes to working with my clients.

**You also said to me that your perceptions of people -- how they hold their bodies, and how they present themselves -- have changed and deepened since becoming involved in the hands-on world of massage. Please talk about that.**

Before massaging I used to always enjoy people watching. It was always kept very superficial based on how they looked. Now that I have a better understanding of how people use their bodies, I get a lot more out of the experience. I now take that skill into my practice as a tool to help relieve people’s problems. Certain things, like how they walk and how they stand, are telling signs of what their body needs help with, to get back into balance.

**How interested are you in the more esoteric or “energy” aspects of bodywork and healing?** As of now, I don’t practice any energy work. I am hoping that as I grow and evolve as a massage therapist, I will be able to incorporate more of that into my work. The more modalities that I know, the more effective I can be for my clients.

**Are some people just “naturals” when it comes to bodywork and massage?** I believe that there are people who are gifted in massage. Even the gifted people still

need some training to become complete, knowledgeable massage therapists.

**You noted to me that bodywork is like art, that it’s very subjective. Please say more.**

No matter how good you are or how many people tell you you’re great, there will eventually be someone who may not think that way. Everybody needs a different approach to reach the goal of great massage. Not everybody wants or needs the same work. That is why it is important for a

I believe that there are people who are gifted in massage. Even the gifted people still need some training to become complete, knowledgeable massage therapists.

good massage therapist to listen to the client and provide the best of his or her abilities for the client. Sometimes it is a great fit and sometimes it is not. I believe if my style or approach to massage does not fit my clients’, it is my job then to see if I can help match them up to another therapist who can fit their needs. It is about the client’s needs, not the therapist’s.

**People come to body workers and massage therapists for a variety of needs. Can you describe the various reasons people come to you?**

People use massage for reasons like relaxation, stress relief, flexibility, stretching, education, and help with correcting body posturing.

**Please talk about “muscle memory”.**

Muscle memory occurs when muscles are used in a repetitive motion. An example would be someone who often shrugs their shoulders in the cold.

**You told me that as a student and as a Teacher’s Aide, you never fall asleep when receiving a massage, but that you did on one occasion fall asleep while receiving a massage from a woman giving you a very different kind of massage than is generally emphasized at AAIMT. Please talk about the relevance of that.** I believe that all

types of massage are important for people to receive. Some people enjoy deep therapeutic work while others enjoy light relaxing touch. I generally prefer a more therapeutic massage but that one student gave the best relaxation massage! Just because she focused on relaxation and not therapeutic, did not mean she was a bad therapist. I have yet to relive a better relaxation massage to this day.

**You told me that when students first start giving massages, they need a lot of guidance about what feels good, and that you are very straightforward in that regard. Please elaborate.**

When you start out at massage school, you want to copy any technique or stroke that feels good. You always hear, “Wow, that feels great, what are you doing?” So they will copy techniques without understanding the reason besides that it feels good. So I feel it is important for the students to understand why they are using a technique so they can formulate a plan for the client, and tie it smoothly into the rest of the massage. I also tried to answer students’ questions honestly, so they are more prepared when they leave school and are looking for their first massage job.

**Are you a massage therapist, a body worker, and/or a healer? In your mind, what is the distinction between the three? (Is it a “ladder”?) What is a healer, and if you are, in what sense? If not, do you aspire to being one?**

I am a massage therapist right now. I hope to evolve and grow into a body worker taking in different modalities and styles and turning them into my own. A massage therapist is one who uses massage to manipulate the muscle tissue and fascia. A body worker is one who goes a little further by moving and manipulating the body to reach their goals. A healer is someone who may use all those approaches plus other modalities to reach the attended goal. So I guess I see it as a ladder with each one building off the other.

**Do you envision yourself adding other modalities to your practice, in the future?**

Yes, I do. In massage, as in all walks of life, one should be growing and expanding. Taking on new challenges and opportunities should always be one’s goal. I also want to excel and be the best therapist I can be. This will mean that I will always be adding and changing skills.

**What does your current practice consist of? Where do you work, and is it going well?**

As I said earlier, I work as a Teacher’s Aide at AAIMT. I also work at In Touch Therapeutic Massage and I do work with a couple of clients in their homes. In all aspects of my professional career things are going great. I am very thankful for all my opportunities.

**What do you like least about your work?**

How some days you can have five clients and the next day

have one. It can be a little inconsistent but it is not that bad.

**What do you most love about your work as a massage therapist?**

I really enjoy working with people. I really enjoy people’s stories and life experiences. I have learned so much from my clients who talk about everything under the sun. I appreciate the chance to help them have a better quality of life.

**And you are juggling your work with having two young children, as well?**

I have two beautiful children, Owen and Lucy. It is difficult at times scheduling work around them, but it is totally worth it. Some days I have to leave early to pick them up, and I only work every other weekend, but they are only young once and I am going to appreciate that while I can.

**Anything else you’d like to add?**

This has been a fun experience for me. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

###

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## Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

# Questions for Jennifer Giacomelli

*A self-described “gypsy traveler”, Jennifer Giacomelli settled down to create, with her husband, the Tree of Life Cultural Arts Studio, in Chelsea. They’ve grown the Tree into a dynamic place -- offering dance, movement, belly dancing, massage, meditation and other classes. Jen was trained in massage at the Desert Healing Institute in Tucson, Arizona. She is 35, and the mother of one child, Solair.*

**Where is your family from--where were you raised?**

My family is from Erie, Pennsylvania. I was born in Pittsburgh. At age 4 we moved to Grand Rapids, where I was raised and where my parents still reside.

**You started off being a dancer, and from a young age. Tell us about that.**

When I was 5, my mom put me in a ballet/tumbling class, which I did not find very motivating. It moved quite slowly with not much energy. Needless to say, I quit. Around

Around the age of 8... or sometime when the movie “Flashdance” came out, I found that I still had an interest in movement, just at a much faster pace, the movie of course was my awakening. So, shortly thereafter, I tried another dance class, this time, JAZZ!  
I LOVED IT!!

the age of 8... or sometime when the movie “Flashdance” came out, I found that I still had an interest in movement, just at a much faster pace, the movie of course was my awakening. So, shortly thereafter, I tried another dance class, this time, JAZZ!  
I LOVED IT!!

**And you kept dancing through high school?**

Yes, by the time I was beginning high school, I had continued my studies in jazz dance as well as Tap. My freshman year I began dancing on the Varsity dance team at East Kentwood High School in Kentwood, Michigan, and continued for four years holding the position as captain my senior year. Our dance team was not your typical high school “pom pom squad”. We were a circle of students, dancers and friends who really just wanted to dance. We attended many camps & competitions, danced at games, held workshops for kids, and created lots of cool stuff with the use of body movement.

**And then you got a job teaching contemporary dance, yes?**

Yes, just after high school I was employed with “Universal Dance Association” based in Memphis. Here, I was a regional staff instructor attending those same camps and competitions as I did in high school, only now teaching the dance routines and judging the competitions all along the Midwest. Feeling the need to explore more and experience desert lands and hot sun, I moved to Tucson in 1993. It was here that I began to teach multiple dance classes a week for students of all ages. “Creative Dance Arts” became my second home and a strong backbone for where the road led me today.

**Where did you get your first massage? And how did you decide to become a massage therapist?**

My first massage was at a festival in Tucson. It was during

the time of dancing about 15 hours a week. I began to notice my body getting sore more often after dancing. It was at this festival that I saw a bunch of student massage therapists offering massage, so having done something to my neck two days prior while dancing, and not being able to turn it, I decided to try it out...I was amazed as to how much lighter my head felt and how much 15 minutes of rubbing changed my range of motion and worked out the “kink” in my neck. After that experience, I became more aware of my body and began to understand how important it is that we take care of our bodies. I found myself doing a lot of self-massage, and decided that it would be a great asset to what I was currently doing. I was very interested in learning how my body does what it does through a lot of anatomy and physiology, and excited about furthering my education of the body so I could share valuable information with students and dancers, and possibly help students and dancers like that one therapist helped me.

**Where did you get your training?**

At the Desert Institute for Healing Arts, in Tucson, in 1996.

And at ITM...International Training Massage School in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 2001. I also consider all of my places of employment a major part of my training, especially Miraval Resort and Spa in Tucson.

**You mentioned to me that massage school “was one of the best experiences of my life,” and that was at least partially because of “all the awakenings I had in massage school.” Please elaborate on that.**

Receiving touch EVERYDAY for a year was an excellent recipe for me to really become aware and mindful of myself and my surroundings. I guess you could say I began to “wake up” and really open my eyes for the first time in my adult years.

This was such an important time in my life primarily because it was so full of information, education and growth. I assume my age played a big role in this being such a memorable time, 23 is a prime time for a person to really start to learn about who they are, and is a time where we begin to mold into what we will continue doing down the road. I was so fascinated with learning about our muscles and how they work and how everything really is connected. Receiving touch EVERYDAY for a year was an excellent recipe for me to really become aware and mind-



ful of myself and my surroundings. I guess you could say I began to “wake up” and really open my eyes for the first time in my adult years. In addition to my personal growth throughout this year... I got to share these experiences with many new friends who shared similar interests.

**As you were going through massage school, you continued to work as a dance instructor. What sorts of realizations emanated from that?**

As mentioned previously, I had many realizations during the time of massage school, but one thing that really came up for me as I learned so much about our bodies, and anatomy, is the importance of maintaining healthy posture, and keeping our muscles soft and stretched. I realized how unnatural some sports and hobbies are for our body. Ballet dance, particularly, stood out for me. Look at the way a ballet dancer uses her body, and holds such positions (legs/feet turned out very much, and the way the pelvis usually is held) to create those “beautiful” lines that a ballet dancer displays! I started to understand why so many ballet dancers have hip problems later down the road. Becoming aware of this strengthened my desire to practice my newfound love of bodywork on dancers, not only to help them through their dancing years to preserve their body, but to educate them and help them understand their bodies’ natural ways, and to share things they could do for themselves to balance out the strain that can be put on their bodies. Such as receiving bodywork and focusing on “correct” alignment while stretching and warming up.



**I know you worked for a number of years at the Miraval Resorts. How did your time at Miraval influence you and affect you?**

Working at a destination spa was the last thing that I thought I wanted to do as a massage therapist, but ended being the best experience that I could have asked for after graduating massage school. Miraval was amazing; the atmosphere was serene and beautiful, and the education that I received in my time there was abundant!!! I got to learn so many more types of massage treatments including body wraps, hydrotherapy baths, ayurvedic massages, and hot stone massage (Miraval's signature massage). I loved the fast pace energy, that seemed to move so effortlessly. Averaging seven massages in a shift, and working on so many different bodies with different needs, really exposed me to a variety of ways to individualize the massage that I am giving. I initially thought that I would be doing a series of "fluff-n- buff" massages, but in the end, found it to be just the opposite. Working at Miraval also gave me the confidence that is needed for a massage therapist to succeed and believe! We had about 50 massage therapists that worked in the spa, and up to 25 on a busy night. This is what helped establish that "fast pace" energy... that I seem to work well with, and being such a people person.... I loved working with so many different therapists, and of course making new friends!!

**And you've been trained in Thai massage, yes? Tell us about your training, and about your experiences with Thai massage.**

Well I was first introduced to Thai Massage at Miraval. We had one or two therapists that were certified and offering Thai Yoga Massage at the spa. I had seen some Thai massage and was very intrigued, primarily because of how much the therapist was using her whole body, especially her feet and legs! It was after a friend of mine came back to the states after spending 1½ years in Thailand studying Thai massage... He practiced on me one day for 3 hours, (which is a normal time frame for a Thai massage). After receiving the massage, I went to work at Miraval, and the entire night felt like I was floating through the halls in between the seven massages I was doing. That night at work, I felt energized, lengthened and light! I decided then that I had to go to Thailand myself and learn Thai massage to enable me to use my body in a variety of ways that I had not yet encountered during my massage practice thus far.

**You will be teaching Thai massage at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy. Are you excited about that?**

Yes, I am very excited to be teaching at the school; in fact, I just completed my first weekend workshop of Thai massage and it was a huge success!! Incorporating Thai stretches and techniques into my own practice has produced the most effective results for my clients. I loved teaching massage students these valuable Thai techniques that they can integrate into their deep tissue or Swedish massage themselves.

In Thailand, my teacher refers to Thai massage as "yoga for the lazy person". Because the person who receives will experience the same benefits as one would after doing a yoga session. With the receiver fully clothed, the practitioner works on the floor (on a mat) using his or her entire body. The massage includes compressions, Zen line work (meridians), putting the client in some various yoga poses, and a lot of passive stretches. Which I believe to be extra beneficial to the person receiving, for they do not have to hold themselves in any one stretch by contracting antagonistic muscles, but can remain completely relaxed!

**You described yourself to me as having been a "gypsy traveler". Please explain.**

While I was in Arizona, and teaching at Creative Dance Arts, I began dancing & performing at the Arizona Renaissance Festival with a bellydance/gypsy troupe called Domba. Domba was a huge support for me going to massage school with helping me pay for my school and just by giving me moral support. It was here that I met my future husband, Sundance, an eclectic, free spirited, world traveler, performer & drummer. Sundance and I soon began to travel

together attending music festivals and art fairs along the West Coast; performing, selling his handmade drums, my handmade gypsy wares, and doing massage. It was just the beginning of what grew into the Tree of Life!

**When did you move back to Michigan from the Southwest? And when did you start, with your husband, the Tree of Life Center, in Chelsea?**

I started to become a "seasonal" resident of Arizona once we started to do a lot of traveling. Living in Arizona, from January to May, I began this in 2000. I would work at Miraval while in Arizona, and then did some festivals in June & July, then come to Michigan to work the Michigan Renaissance Festival. Here Sundance had his own drum booth, and me & my business partner, Heidi, (from Domba) had our own gypsy-clothing booth. I also did massage, and Sundance and I started a world drum and dance group that would perform every weekend. After two years of this, Sundance and I were blessed with a beautiful gift named Solair. Solair is what brought us back to Michigan for good in 2003. We opened the doors to Tree of Life Cultural Arts Studio in August of 2006.

**Please talk a bit about the Tree of Life Center, its purpose, and its programs.**

The purpose of opening the doors to the Tree of Life was to provide a space for community to come together, open minds and hearts to traditions from around the world, preserve the cultural arts, support the artists in our community, stimulate individual growth, initiate health and wellness to every body, bring innocent joy to others, inspire artistic expression in each and every person, encourage people to share their heart songs, allow the rhythm of life to move freely within our bodies. This is a chunk of our mission

Working at a destination spa was the last thing that I thought I wanted to do as a massage therapist, but ended being the best experience that I could have asked for after graduating massage school... Averaging seven massages in a shift, and working on so many different bodies with different needs, really exposed me to a variety of ways to individualize the massage that I am giving.

statement, thought it would answer part of this question nicely.

We have four main branches within the Tree... "The Studio", where we offer a variety of dance, movement and drum classes including African, Brazilian (capoeira), bellydance, jazz, hip hop, yoga, Nia, tap and hand drumming for kids and adults. "Café Touba" is our organic Tea bar where we offer coffee drinks, teas and smoothies (we were voted best smoothies in 2007 by readers of *Current* magazine). We also have a small retail space called "Ancestral Voices" where one can find hand made drums by Sundance, Silk gypsy wares by me, other treasures from local artists and textiles, carvings and more from around the world. Last but certainly not Least... "Hands n Motion Massage center" where Jessica Snyder, Craig Parian and myself offer a variety of massage and bodywork treatments such as: Swedish, deep tissue, hot stone, prenatal, shiatsu, Ayurvedic treatments and Thai Yoga massage.

**How much of your work at Tree of Life is giving massages and bodywork, versus the dance and other classes you teach?**



I feel like I devote my energy equally to all aspects of the Tree!

**Tell us a bit about your belly-dancing classes, and what you enjoy about that.**

I really enjoy all of the classes that I teach because each one is unique and brings about different energy, but what I enjoy about the tribal bellydance is the subtle movements and opportunity that it provides to bring people together as it is a community dance.



# Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

## Questions for Jennifer Giacomelli (continued)

Do you see yourself as a massage therapist, a body worker, and/or a healer? What do those terms mean to you? If you see yourself as a "healer", what does mean? And if not, do you aspire to be a "healer".

I usually refer to myself as a massage therapist, or a body worker, though I have heard clients refer to me as a healer. For me, though, I feel the term "healer" may bring about unrealistic expectations.

**What other modalities have you taught, and which ones have you incorporated into your regular practice?**

I have trained colleagues in one on one sessions in hot stone massages, and trained new therapists at Miraval on how to do certain body wraps and hydrotherapy treatments. To this day, I pretty much incorporate all of my modalities, especially deep tissue with the Thai, creating a unique table/Thai massage.

**You told me that you "have never been great with elusiveness", as it relates to esoteric healing. Please explain.**

For example... this question ... I'm a very hands on person, I work best with what I can physically feel using my hands and body while still using an intuitive approach.

**You also said to me that "any kind of touch is good for souls, our psyches." Please elaborate.**

I remember when I was very little, crying, very upset about something, a neighbor boy who was about three years old lightly placed his little hand on my shoulder, I had tingle run through my body, and I instantly felt lifted and cared for. This vivid memory serves as a prime example of the power of touch. Whether it's a great massage, or just a hand to say, "it's ok", touch reminds us that people do care, and nurturing someone is always healthy.

**You noted to me that your massage work grounds you, as compared to your work as a dance teacher, which is more highly energized, and which, in your words, "can be like being in Vegas." Can you talk about that?**

In the massage room, it's very calm, quiet and serene, which in turn creates a very grounding atmosphere, where as in the dance room, it's loud, booming and buzzing, kind of like Vegas!

**Do you absorb the energy of your clients, including (sometimes) their negative energy?**

I would say that I do not absorb my client's energy on a mental level, but on a physical level, I have felt waves of energy pass through my body from theirs.

**What is really important to you, as a massage therapist, in terms of boundary issues?**

Making sure my client feels safe and comfortable; one thing that's nice about the Thai massage is that it is performed with the client fully clothed, which helps people to feel less vulnerable.

**What do you like least about your work as a massage therapist and body worker? What is hardest for you?**

What I like least is when I find it difficult to accommodate my client's schedule. What is hardest for me is when I give five treatments in a row, all of the same modality. Versatility is the key for me!

**What do you love most about your hands-on work with people's bodies?**

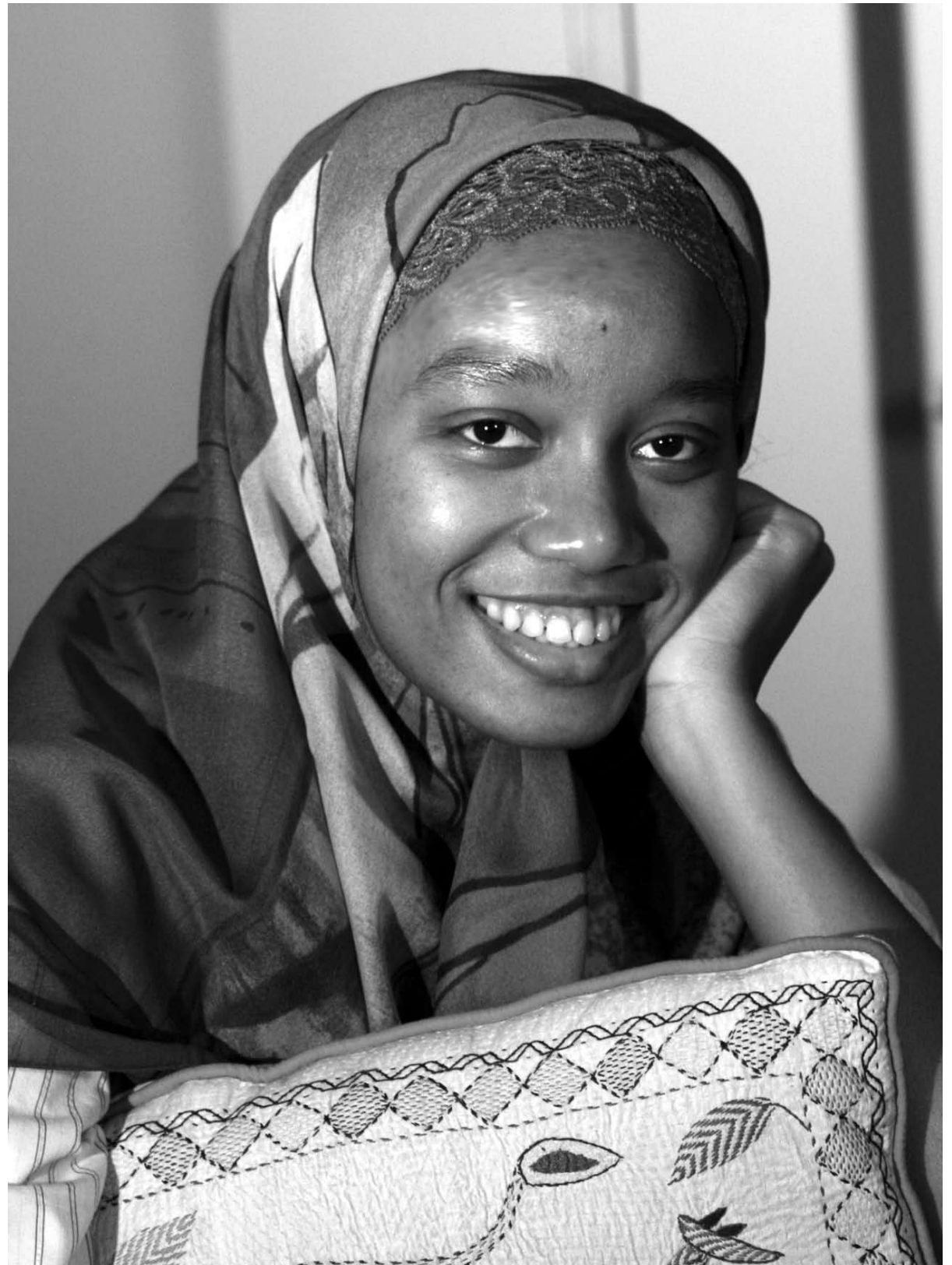
I feel that working hands on with people's bodies is not limited to my massage practice, but an integral part of my work as a dance teacher as well.

I love most when I can really make a difference for people, in the massage room and in the dance studio. Whether its working out a kink, or helping someone step outside of their box, there's no better feeling then when someone truly appreciates your presence, and my clients and students make me feel that.

Thanks, Jen.  
Thanks, Bill.

###

## Questions for Tohfa Khabir



*Tohfa Khabir, 22, works at the Relaxstation in downtown Ann Arbor, and is also a full-time student in a Physical Therapy Assistant program at Washtenaw Community College.*

*She was trained in massage at the Everest Institute. One of nine children, her father is also a massage therapist, and her mother was trained in Reiki.*

**Where were you raised, Tohfa?**

I was born in Pittsburgh. I don't know where exactly I was born, because my mother was traveling somewhere when she went into labor. Three women she didn't know let her have me inside their house. I don't remember anything about Pennsylvania because I grew up in Amherst, Virginia in the middle of the woods.

**Tell us about your family background, please.**

Most people always assume my family and I are from a different country, but we all were born and raised in the United States. My parents had 9 children and

I am number 5. All of my brothers and sisters are old enough to take care of themselves except for the two youngest girls.

**Looking back at your girlhood, were there clues that you would be gifted with your hands?**

I don't know if there were any clues that I would be gifted with my hands... I played the flute and have always liked using my

Growing up in the woods I was a complete tomboy... If you have ever watched Winnie the Pooh you have seen him wrap his arms and legs around the tree and climb straight up... well I used to be able to climb just like that. I chopped wood, built tree forts, caught snakes...

hands to create things (like arts and crafts). I used to want to be a potter and make beautiful bowls and vases with clay. I still want to learn that art.

**Were you naturally athletic or kinesthetic?**

Growing up in the woods I was a complete tomboy... used to pride myself on how fast I could climb a tree. If you have ever watched *Winnie the Pooh* you have seen him wrap his arms and legs around the tree and climb straight up... well I used to be able to climb just like that. I chopped wood, built tree forts, caught snakes, and various insects. In middle school, I joined the cross-country team

When you don't have your own business as a professional, you don't get to decide who you should or should not work on as a woman practicing Islam. When I become a doctor, I will treat men and women just like any other doctor.

though I didn't run in any of the meets... I loved to run. I also used to play football with my older brother. I would consider myself naturally athletic.

**How long have you been working at Relaxstation?**

I have been working at Relaxstation since around October 2006.

**Please tell us about your training as a massage therapist? Do you have a diploma or certification... please explain how that works?**

I received my training as a massage therapist at Everest Institute. I went to school with my father on the weekends for 10 hours each day for 9 months. Michigan requires about 500 hours of training and I had 700 hours of training and received a diploma. My understanding is that you can go back to school for specialized training in certain areas such as reflexology, and receive a special certificate for that modality. Then you can also take the national certification test so that you are qualified to work in any state. At my school, we received training in many different modalities such as sports massage, trigger points, prenatal, infant massage, general Swedish, and deep tissue. However, I don't have any particular specialized certificates.

**What do you mean that you went to school with your father? Was he a student at the same time, or an instructor?**

Ironically he was both... let me explain. Yes, my dad and I were in the same massage therapy class (he has been practicing massage therapy for 20 years, but hadn't gone to school to get his diploma). Our instructor Clifford "Ola" Jordan is a Reiki master and, of course, believes in energy healing. My father also believes in and practices energy healing, though he is not a Reiki master. So when another instructor at the school wanted our teacher (Ola) to teach her class about Reiki energy healing, and Ola couldn't make the appointment, he called my father and asked if he could teach the class. My father agreed and wound up changing a whole class of people who didn't believe in energy healing into believers. He did this by asking the class "who has a head ache?" Four women raised their hands and my dad used energy healing to remove all four of their headaches, one at a time.

**And you are in school, also, to become a Physical Therapist?**

Yes, I am attending Washtenaw Community College as a full time student in the Physical Therapy Assistant program.

**What are your longer-term goals?**

My long-term goal is to become a doctor, and I am still undecided as to whether I want to go into med school or become a doctor of physical therapy. I still have plenty of time to decide. Once I become a doctor I would like to open a health clinic providing various different natural and alternative health care.

I notice that you give massages to both women and men. Will you talk about that a bit, being an Islamic woman, and the issues which arise from that, for you?

When I first started working at Relaxstation I had intended to only work on females, but that would have been very difficult at a place like Relaxstation where many of the clients are "walk-ins." If I had insisted on working exclusively with women I wouldn't have a job there now because I wouldn't have made much money. When you don't

have your own business as a professional, you don't get to decide who you should or should not work on as a woman practicing Islam. When I become a doctor I will treat men and women just like any other doctor.

Do you know other Islamic women in southeastern Michigan who are doing healing bodywork, and have healing practices?

Yes, there are many other Islamic women in southeastern Michigan that do body work and have healing practices. I know other Muslim women who are massage therapists, physical therapists, acupuncturists, and doctors. Many Muslim women are healers.

**How did you first become interested in massage and healing?**

My parents greatly influenced my interest in natural health care. It was just something that I grew up with and was valued in our household. It was that interest that caused me to want to be a doctor and massage therapy just seemed like a good start.

You have told me that you're interested in Reiki and in energy healing. Please tell us about that.

My mother and father both practiced energy healing and meditation. My mother learned Reiki here in Ann Arbor, and as I mentioned, my father has been practicing massage and energy healing for at least 20 years. When my father and I went to school he would often get called out of class to give energy healings to other students who were in pain that the teachers couldn't help. Once there was a girl who had kidney stones in one of the other classes. She was in so much pain that she was curled up crying on one of the massage tables. The teachers couldn't help her so they got my dad out of class and he gave her an energy healing and her pain was gone within a matter of minutes. My dad explains energy healing as the same concept as jumping a car battery- you have positive and negative energy. All you have to do is provide positive energy and unblock the qi (life force energy) so that the body can heal itself. Growing up with parents like mine it is only natural that I am interested in, and want to learn, energy healing.

**Are you a healer, and if so, what does that mean? If not, do you aspire to be one?**

A healer is anyone who, for lack of better words, practices healing arts; a doctor, massage therapist, naturopath, physical therapist, spiritual healer etc. I like to think of myself as a healer in training... as I travel through the journey of life, I will always learn new things, I will always be in training. No one knows everything. In the lyrics of Erykah Badu "the man who thinks he knows something, knows that he knows nothing." It is very important to remain humble.

**Do you find that you absorb the energy, including the negative energy sometimes, of your clients, from working in such a hands-on way with them? Is that an issue for you?**

I like to think of myself as a healer in training...

No, it's not an issue for me. I usually don't absorb energy from my clients because I use the technique of shaking the energy from my hands as I go along. I also keep a boundary between my feelings and their feelings. I don't let myself get attached to their feelings... I empathize with them but I don't let their energy become my energy. Oftentimes clients come in and their energy is upset (usually because they are in pain), they look upset. If I get upset, then I won't be able to do a good job. There are exceptions, however; when a client has good energy, I use it and it makes me feel better. Most therapists have a client that just makes their day and I am no exception. Earlier, I stated that absorbing energy is "usually" not an issue, that is, because every once in a while when working on someone with a headache, I start to feel what they are feeling out of the blue. When that happens, when it first starts, I use a breathing technique in which I visualize healing energy come into the area of my headache, while breathing in. When I breathe out, I visualize the negative energy leaving. This technique works every time for me and is the reason I don't get headaches. I have not suffered from a headache for any prolonged period of time.

**What is really important to you, as a massage therapist, in terms of boundary issues?**

The most important thing in terms of boundary is developing a trust and never doing anything that my client or I would feel uncomfortable with, or would compromise that trust. Because I am a Muslim woman, I do not let male therapists massage me. All of the male therapists at Relaxstation understand and respect this.

I know you also work at a physical therapy clinic that specializes in working with people who have been in car accidents and other accidents. Tell us about your experience working there.

I worked at a physical therapist clinic in Detroit, and from my experience there I believe that massage therapy should be a crucial part of physical therapy. So many people that have been injured would improve much quicker and better if they received massage therapy ASAP after their injury.

I was in a rollover accident going to work last winter on a Sunday morning. I slid on some ice and wound up upside down in a ditch off the right shoulder. When I went home and got over the shock I started feeling the pain and tightness in my neck; because my father is a massage therapist I had a neck/ shoulder massage 2-3 times a day (short massages of 10-15 minutes each) for the rest of the week.

I understand what people who have been in accidents go through, and I think that it's a shame that they usually don't get the treatment they need when they need it... it would make such a difference.

I was back at work the following Sunday massaging the pain from other people's necks. I understand what people who have been in accidents go through, and I think that it's a shame that they usually don't get the treatment they need when they need it... it would make such a difference.

**What is hardest about your work?**

The hardest thing about work is making sure I manage my energy levels and staying on top of everything. It can be very stressful and tiring if you don't get a chance to rejuvenate.

What do you find most satisfying about your work as a massage therapist and physical-therapist-in-training? The most satisfying thing is knowing you have the ability to make someone feel better.

Thank you, Tohfa.

###

**Writers/Journalists/Essayists Wanted**

We're interested in journalistic articles, fiction and non-fiction stories, personal essays, commentary, thought pieces, and interviews with interesting people in the wider holistic community. For more information, or to suggest story ideas, contact Bill Zirinsky at bill@crazywisdom.net or call him at the store at 734-665-2757.

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## Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

### Questions for Gillian Udrys



*Gillian Udrys, 37, worked for a number of years as an occupational therapist in acute settings, before getting into the world of massage. She recently graduated from the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy, and she is working at the Physical Medicine and Rehab/Spine Program at the U of M. She is the mother of two young daughters.*

**Where were you raised, Gillian?**

I was raised here in Ann Arbor. I moved here with my family just before I started 1<sup>st</sup> grade; it was a great place to grow up.

**When did you complete your educational program at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy (AAIMT), and what are you doing now?**

I finished in August of this year and the great thing about the AAIMT program is that I've been working with people for nearly a year, now; we start our "hands on" training almost right away. As far as work, I'm with the Physical Medicine and Rehab/Spine Program at the U of M, as well as participating in a teaching assistant program at AAIMT.

**I know you were also trained as an occupational therapist. Please give us a sense of your life path over**

...If there was a tree around, I would climb it; any sort of horizontal bar, I would swing on, hang from or flip off it... and not a broken bone to speak of!

**the last fifteen years which led you to becoming a massage therapist and bodyworker?**

I worked for a number of years as an OT before having children, and was fortunate enough to be able to stay home

with them until they reached school age; once they did, I wanted to go back to work but branch out a bit, still utilizing my background in OT. Looking back, had I known more about massage therapy 15 years ago I may have chosen a different path, but I'm very happy with how I've

Yes, I was very tactile as a kid, I still am really; I needed to feel things and move things, to see how it worked or what it was all about. I'm very much a kinesthetic learner...

come to be where I am now. I think my background in OT gives me a great foundation and perspective to incorporate into massage therapy.

**As you look back on it, what 'clues' were there that you would end up in a profession which is about touch and body awareness. For instance, you told me that as a child you liked climbing trees and you were very physically active. What other 'clues' were there?**

Yes, I was pretty active; if there was a tree around, I would climb it; any sort of horizontal bar, I would swing on, hang from or flip off it... and not a broken bone to speak of! I can remember, as a kid, being really curious about how my body moved and what it could do. I would push my knee cap around as far as it would go and poke around underneath to feel what was there; I'd wiggle my fingers and watch my forearm "jumping" up near my elbow or grab the tendon ("ropy thing" when I was a kid) at the back of my knee and try to hold onto while I straightened my knee; things like that. So when I started learning about anatomy and physiology in school, I was hooked, I loved it.

**So, then, you were very "tactile" as a kid? You were kinesthetically intelligent?**

Yes, I was very tactile as a kid, I still am really; I needed to feel things and move things, to see how it worked or what it was all about. I'm very much a kinesthetic learner; I need to do and be in action in order to feel like I fully understand how something works or how something should be done. I have a pretty good sense of my body in space and in motion, I think that's why it's easier for me to learn things by moving and doing than just reading or watching.

**You told me that you love "educating people about their bodies". Will you talk about that?**

I think it's partly selfish, because I have such an interest in it myself; I want to share that interest with people in hopes of helping them understand a little more about their body. I really enjoy seeing the "ah-ha" moment when things click and make sense. When you understand where muscles are and what they do it may help you understand where the pain is coming from and why; possibly realize something you're doing to perpetuate the pain cycle. I think it's common to take for granted what we can do until we can't do those things anymore. Educating people about their bodies brings about a certain level of self-awareness; which, I hope, in turn, leads to a healthier way of life.

**And what was the focus of your work as an occupational therapist?**

I mainly worked in acute care, hospitals and rehabilitation settings. I was part of a team approach to rehab; working with physical therapists, speech therapists, social workers, nursing staff and of course, family. I worked for an orthopedic surgery group for a short time, as well, which focused mainly on therapy for upper extremity/hands.

**You told me you loved the AAIMT program, and that it was “fantastic”. Why?**

Well, it’s a very comprehensive program. We learn many different massage techniques, in-depth skeletal and muscular anatomy, fundamental physiology of the major systems of the body and always tying in the effects and benefits of massage therapy; the body/mind connection was always stressed.

I felt like I got a lot from each instructor, too; each has his/her own style and focus, their own perspective and experience in massage therapy. I think it’s very important to learn from different sources and take what you need from each in order to develop an individual style and approach of your own. It was a challenging year but I really enjoyed it!

**I know you get to practice a great deal on family and friends, and other students, when you are going through the AAIMT program. Talk about the role of critiquing and feedback in the development of a bodyworker?**

I think it’s extremely important because as the bodyworker we don’t have the opportunity to experience our own work, we don’t know what our touch feels like. All the feedback we’re given is another important guide in the learning process; without it we have no idea if we’re effective. It helps build comfort and confidence and that’s a big component to being a good massage therapist.

The specific techniques we learn require a pretty thorough knowledge of the body in order to be effective.

**Did you learn some complementary modalities, also? And if so, which ones?**

Yes, we did; Reflexology, Shiatsu, Aromatherapy, Alexander Technique, Trager and Thai massage were some we learned and learned about. We spent a lot of time with Reflexology and Shiatsu and learned a fair amount about the fundamentals of the eastern approach.

**To what degree did your massage training stress the mind/body connection, and the emotional elements of wellness?**

The mind/body connection was always stressed. If you think about what people do if they’re scared or under a lot of stress; their bodies tense. It’s less apparent right away, when our bodies are under emotional stress as opposed to physical stress or injury. Eventually prolonged stress, emotional or psychological, starts to manifest itself physically. It’s much more apparent when we suffer physical injury or trauma; broken bones, sprained or strained joints, or bruises. A massage therapist may find an area in a muscle that when touched and worked on evokes an emotional response; a place in the muscle that has “remembered” or “held on to” stress; something the client may be completely unaware of. Our bodies and minds seem to be connected and work together in ways we’re unaware of; quiet powerful, really.

**How interested were you at AAIMT in learning anatomy and physiology? Please talk about the contribution of rigorous training in the education of someone working on the body.**

I love anatomy and physiology! I think the amount we learn is very important to someone wanting to become a good massage therapist. The specific techniques we learn require a pretty thorough knowledge of the body in order to be effective. I think there have been some misconceptions about massage therapy and its potential role as a therapeutic tool in physical and emotional wellbeing. To be a part of someone’s recovery from, say, a rotator cuff injury, as a massage therapist, we have to know which muscles are involved, where those muscles begin and end, what those muscles do and the healing process of that muscle tissue.

**Do you think some people are just “naturals” in bodywork and massage?**

I think it’s common to take for granted what we can do until we can’t do those things anymore.

I do. There are some people who start out very comfortable with what they’re doing and have a nice touch and flow to their work.

**In your program at AAIMT, were there students who were really excellent in the cognitive tests, but just not so good with their hands? And vice versa?**

Yes, I think just like people who are “naturals” there are people who have to work harder at one aspect or another. Some may, initially, be less comfortable with table work and having their hands on another person, while others will have a harder time with the book learning. Each has his or her own skill set.

**I can think of a really excellent massage therapist I know, really natural with his skills, who is not so good with the head and neck. When I mentioned that to you, you said he was probably apprehensive around “endangerment spots”. Please explain.**

Well, when I say endangerment sites, I mean areas where nerves and blood vessels are exposed and not protected by a lot of muscle or bony structures; places where a lot of pressure shouldn’t be placed. There are a few in the neck and the back of the knee is another. I said he may have been a little apprehensive because I know I was when I first started working around the head and neck. You say head and neck and think vertebral column and spinal cord, it’s a pretty vital area of our bodies; another reason it’s very important to have a good understanding and knowledge of anatomy.

**Where would you like to be in 5 years? Would you like to do some training in craniosacral massage, and/or some Eastern methodologies?**

I definitely want to gain some training in craniosacral massage. I’ve had limited exposure to it but have heard from both practitioners and clients that it’s an effective

...As the bodyworker we don’t have the opportunity to experience our own work; we don’t know what our touch feels like. All the feedback we’re given is another important guide in the learning process; without it we have no idea if we’re effective. It helps build comfort and confidence and that’s a big component to being a good massage therapist.

form of massage therapy. In 5 years I see myself here in the area thriving as a massage therapist, whether on my own or with a group, I don’t know, and teaching in some capacity. I’ve discovered that I really enjoy sharing what I’ve learned with others, especially in a hands-on environment...probably because I love learning that way.

**Are you a “healer”? What does it mean, to you, to be a “healer”? If you’re not a healer, do you aspire to be one? If not, why not?**

I see myself more as a tool in the healing process; it’s very much a combined effort on my part as well as the client who comes to me. I can provide the physical modality to help during the process of healing and tissue repair, or release physical and emotional stress that may be held in muscle tissue. I can provide a place and time for someone to “turn off” for an hour, some time to relax where they may not be able to do it otherwise. Ultimately it’s the person who comes to me who will complete the healing process; possibly making changes where **needed to break a cycle that may be perpetuating pain or dysfunction.**

**AAIMT keeps training and sending out into the world of southeastern Michigan dozens of newly**

**certified massage therapists each year. How is the “marketplace” right now for bodyworkers and massage therapists, as far as you know? And is the demand for them keeping up with the supply?**

I think the “marketplace” as you say, is good for massage therapists; I think general awareness and knowledge about what we do has increased in recent years and continues to improve. As for the number of people AAIMT educates and trains every year, in my experience, that’s okay, too. I feel like there are as many niches in which massage can be utilized as there are reasons people seek the training. The supply-and-demand seems to be pretty well balanced; as with anything, it is what you make it.

**How do you manage, for yourself, not absorbing your clients’ energies, so as not to be drained by them? Is that an issue for you? I know it is for some bodyworkers, and not for others.**

It hasn’t been an issue for me, to this point; I think some practitioners are more susceptible to certain energies and have to set boundaries and have ways to avoid being drained of their own energies. I try to create an open, positive atmosphere when I work with people; I focus on my intent what I feel in the tissue.

**What is really important to you, as a massage therapist, in terms of boundary issues?**

Well, I think maintaining a safe and professional environment for my clients as well as for myself is very important. The massage therapist/client relationship is a fairly intimate one, given the nature of massage, so there must be trust and respect; emotional and physical boundaries need to be established and understood by both therapist and client. I think, ultimately, it’s the role of the therapist to set those boundaries. Part of our role is to be understanding and nonjudgmental but not become counselor/massage therapist or involved in personal lives. It’s a fine line but an important one for the client and massage therapist to stay on their respective sides.

**What do you like least about your work as a bodyworker and massage therapist?**

The misconception that massage therapy isn’t therapeutic; that’s my biggest frustration. Massage can be beneficial for insomnia and anxiety as well as tight sore muscles. I think it’s all about educating people about massage, the more people know about massage and its benefits, the better we’ll all be.

**What do you love about your work as a bodyworker and massage therapist?**

Everything! I’m so happy to have found something I really

love doing. I really enjoy the opportunity each client gives me to be a part of their process to a healthier body. It’s an opportunity for me to use the knowledge I have and the tools I have to help people to a healthier, happier body and I love that. My satisfaction comes with people telling me they feel much better and what I did really helped. It really makes me feel good about what I do.

**Do you have a family?**

Yes, I do. I’ve been married for almost 12 years now and have 2 daughters; Annika who is 8 years old and Nora who is 7 years old.

**Anything else you’d like to add?**

Just to thank you for this opportunity, it’s been fun to reflect on the past year and a half of my journey to becoming a massage therapist.

###



## Hands On Healing ~ Crazy Wisdom Interviews Seven Up-and-Coming Massage Therapists and Aspiring Healers under the Age of 40

### Questions for Eril Andes



*Eril Andes, 30, was raised in Ann Arbor, and she was trained in massage at the Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy. She is currently working at J'Spaa on Jackson Road, and she is at the final level of her multi-year training program at Ann Arbor's Polarity Center to become a polarity practitioner. She is also the mother of a young daughter.*

**You told me, Eril, that rather than go to college you decided to "find what I was interested in and then study it briefly." Can you tell me about your path to becoming a massage therapist and bodyworker?**

My path to becoming a massage therapist was more of a calling than a career opportunity. I had always had an interest in the healing arts and knew that I would work in this area in some capacity. I was just unsure which one. My desire to become a massage therapist began to emerge when I was living in Florida. I had been corresponding with a good friend and mentor, who asked me if I had ever considered pursuing a career in massage. This question really resonated with me, and I began to investigate programs in

Florida. I quickly realized that I had much more support back in Michigan and made arrangements to return home with the goal of enrolling in a massage program.

**You mentioned to me that a friend of yours bought you your first massage table. How or why did that come to pass?**

When I returned from Florida, I promptly enrolled at the

The polarity model holds that when energy systems function both in their natural state and without significant blockages, inherent health and balance can be experienced.

Ann Arbor Institute of Massage Therapy (AAIMT) to begin classes that fall. As I just mentioned, my friend and mentor, a woman named Dr. Elizabeth Poage Baxter, was highly supportive of my decision to begin studying mas-

sage. In passing conversation I shared with her that I had a friend who was selling a massage table, and she offered to buy it for me as an investment in my future career.

**You have talked to me about being a "five sense observer." What do you mean by that?**

Not to get ahead of myself, but this ability really began to emerge when I started studying polarity. I realize now that this was a skill I was employing in previous massage sessions, but polarity provided me with the context in which to define it. By "five senses observer," I mean when doing an initial intake with a client I find that I am gathering information using all my five senses. This provides me with increased insight when we work together to create a treatment plan.

**You attended the AAIMT. How long were you studying there? What does their program consist of? Do you feel they did a good job of training you?**

The AAIMT program that I attended was a 650-hour program that consisted of both classroom and hands-on training. It was a thorough program that provided me with an extremely solid foundation upon which I could build. It

Talk therapy doesn't really pertain to my current focus. I found out early on that my talent came kinesthetically, and my heightened communication skills, due to being raised by a pair of therapists, came secondarily.

took a year to complete one of the best educations I could have asked for in this field. I got an amazing start in my profession as a massage therapist at AAIMT.

**After getting your diploma from AAIMT, what did you do first in terms of beginning your massage practice?**

The first step I took was to create a business plan for Ella Massage, the business I wanted to own and operate. I was fortunate enough to find an affordable location in Whitmore Lake to have my practice and began marketing myself as a massage therapist. Whitmore Lake is a smaller community and I was able to begin to build my practice through advertising and word-of-mouth referrals.

**You worked in Whitmore Lake for a few years and then moved back to Ann Arbor? Did you work out of your home?**

When I began working in Whitmore Lake I had an office space in a small work-out facility and then moved my practice to the office of Dr. Jerry Burbaum, a naturopath and bioenergetics bodyworker. I worked in this location for three years before returning to Ann Arbor, where I began to practice out of my home following the birth of my daughter. This is another aspect of massage therapy that I find very appealing, as I was able to work out of the house for my daughter's first two years.

**And now you are working where?**

I decided to move my practice out of my home because I wanted to expand my clientele and was ready to be around adults again. Initially, I divided my appointments between my home and the J'Spaa on Jackson Road, eventually making the transition to the J'Spaa full-time. I have found it enriching to have the opportunity to work with skilled practitioners in an environment that supports a holistic approach to self-care.

**Can you talk about the spectrum of reasons people come to see you for?**

People come to see me for myriad reasons that range from



relaxation purposes to stress management. Clients also come to see me for chronic pain and postural dysfunction. The reasons that people seek massage therapy are highly individualized.

**How many of your clients are long-term and how many are just one-shot deals?**

“One shot deals” isn’t necessarily a fair description. People comprehend their need for support differently. For some their needs may be met with one massage, but many seek and attain the benefits of ongoing care. Either way, I am

What I have learned has compelled me, both personally and professionally, to make the changes in my own lifestyle that I would recommend to my clients.

happy to accommodate the diverse needs of people that seek massage as a means of self-care.

**You grew up in an interesting Ann Arbor family, with both of your parents having worked as therapists, and both of them having been on paths of personal and spiritual growth. Can you talk about how this has influenced your own path?**

I was fortunate to be raised in an environment that supported growth of all kinds. It was a blessing to have such open-minded parents that worked deeply on bettering themselves and others. I learned early the benefits of self-discovery, which had a great impact on starting me on my own path as a healer.

**Also, with respect to your own path, you mentioned to me that with your upbringing and family life much got talked about, and you knew you “didn’t want to do talk therapy.” Please elaborate.**

Talk therapy doesn’t really pertain to my current focus. I found out early on that my talent came kinesthetically, and my heightened communication skills, due to being raised by a pair of therapists, came secondarily. Both of my parents have been wonderful role models and taught me the importance of honoring one’s own growth process. However, my skills and experience directed me towards hands-on work.

**You are now being trained to be a polarity therapy practitioner?**

That is correct. I am fortunate enough to know Karen Kerns, a local polarity practitioner and instructor, who is a driving force behind my desire to learn this modality. Within my daughter’s first year, I had a strong desire to expand my skill base. My mother suggested that I connect with Karen and enroll in classes through the Polarity Center.

**Can you explain to our readers what that consists of?**

A polarity therapy practitioner is trained in a mentorship style program, with a curriculum that includes orthodox anatomy and physiology, energy exploration, and how they are integrated.

**Where are you doing your training and with whom?**

I am completing my training at the Polarity Center. I am currently finishing Level IV, which is the final level of polarity training. John Bodry, Karen Kerns, and Renee Rutz are highly trained practitioners and very skilled instructors, and I have had the benefit of learning from them.

**Can you describe Polarity Therapy for our readers?**

Polarity therapy is a subtle-touch therapy that works on treating the whole person and supporting the body’s natural self-healing abilities. The polarity model holds that when energy systems function both in their natural state and without significant blockages, inherent health and balance can be experienced. When treating the whole person, a polarity practitioner uses energy-based bodywork in conjunction with anatomy and physiology to help bring balance and awareness to the body.

**You explained to me that in becoming a Polarity Therapist, you are having to reckon with making profound**

**changes in the way you practice, and reckon with making complete lifestyle changes. Can you talk about that?**

I have been exposed to information that has given me a deeper understanding of the balance and flow of energy. What I have learned has compelled me, both personally and professionally, to make the changes in my own lifestyle that I would recommend to my clients.

**How is massage different from polarity?**

Massage involves working on soft tissue and the muscular structure to relax the body and/or alleviate physical discomfort. Polarity involves addressing energetic as well as physical components.

**You said to me that in learning Polarity, you “don’t want to cram it all in, I want it to be slow and steady...I am learning patience and confidence.” Please talk about that issue, as it pertains to becoming a Polarity practitioner.**

I have been working on my Polarity training for three years. My curriculum has been intentionally structured so that one cannot rush through it, but provides ample time to ingest the information we are learning. In order to begin working on clients, it is essential that we have a thorough understanding of the profound effects of Polarity. Therefore, as budding practitioners we participate in our own Polarity process to best be able to identify and address our future clients’ needs.

**When does a massage therapist become a healer? What does it mean, to you, to begin to think of yourself as a healer, not simply a massage therapist or polarity therapist, or a bodyworker?**

In essence, a massage therapist is a healer. When giving a massage, the goal is to help your client to feel more comfortable in his or her body. I began to think of myself as a healer when I was able to see and hear from my clients the difference that massage was making for them in their lives. I then realized the profound effect of helping someone work towards wellness. I wanted to expand my knowledge base, to allow me to help a broader spectrum of people on a variety of different levels.

**Anything else you’d like to add?**

I must mention how eternally grateful I am to my mother, Catherine Lilly, for her facilitation and support of my continuing education in massage and Polarity. Without her it would have been considerably harder for me to achieve these goals. There are also numerous other individuals, from babysitters to bodyworkers, who have been indispensable in my pursuit of a greater education.

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