

Hands of healing

Retreat center to help seriously ill children heal

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The child looked frightened, but nobody seemed to notice.

The doctor and the nurses had other things on their minds. Equipment needed moving, tools needed arranging. There's much to do before an appendectomy.

Only Shay Beider saw the distress on the little girl's face. Only she —the sole bystander in the room —noticed that it remained as the anesthesiologist put her under.

Something inside Beider said, "No. It doesn't have to look like this."

Eight years later, the Northwest resident heads the national nonprofit Integrative Touch for Kids — an organization she founded. The nonprofit brings comfort to sick children in the form of gentle massage. It recently announced plans to open a retreat center in Tucson next summer.

"You create a safe space for children and give them as many tools as you can for healing themselves," Beider said. "That's really what it's all about."

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Courtesy of Integrative Touch for Kids. Shay Beider, middle. founded Integrative Touch for Kids to give children positive experiences of touch in hospital environments where touch often is associated with pain.

By Laura Marble,
The Explorer



Back before Beider had her defining moment at the scene of an appendectomy, she had intended to become a pediatric surgeon. She was shadowing a doctor at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, that day, as part of her pre-med study.

But the experience set her in a new direction. She left the operation room wondering what might have been done to lessen the child's fear.

To put herself through school at University of California—Los Angeles, Beider worked as a massage therapist. Once, a client told her that a massage she gave him made all the difference the next day when he went under anesthesia for heart surgery.

Beider knew that gentle touch could relieve fear.

"I thought if someone had given the child some touch going in, she might have had a different experience?" she said.

Beider asked the head of surgery at Children's Hospital if the center might consider starting a massage program. That person directed Beider to a family-care committee at the hospital, which said if she could come up with a plan and fund it, she could proceed.

Before long, Beider returned with a grant for about \$900,000. And from there, she began thinking bigger.

As director of the hospital's new integrative touch program, Beider began seeing the benefits of massage for terminally ill children.

"As kids are in the process of dying, there's so much emotional chaos in the family," she said. "People tend to fight it until the last possible moment with children, and when they start to realize nothing is working, they have to shift quickly to accepting death."

Beider connected with Trinity Kids Care, a hospice in Los Angeles, to help create a massage program there.

When that succeeded, she went national. Beider began speaking at doctors' conferences across the country about the uses in hospitals for massage. Medical centers began asking her to train their staff. Publications solicited articles.

Despite the interest, Beider began to notice that few hospitals had money to support healing touch programs. Those that did often were at the mercy of philanthropists, whose large gifts couldn't necessarily be counted on year after year. Also, the more conservative hospitals wanted to see more research.

"I started doing that but my heart was still with that experience of healing," Beider said.

Maybe the time wasn't right, Beider thought, to go full speed ahead at getting massage programs into hospitals across the United States. Maybe she would do more good by stepping outside of the hospital model.

Early this year, her national organization, Integrative Touch for Kids, which now has a fairly strong funding base in Chicago, decided to create a retreat center in Tucson.

"There was a recognition that for something like this to last, it needs to be in a physical place that is, itself, healing," Beider said. "We chose Tucson for the healing community here and the healing properties of the desert?"

In summer of 2009, a handful of families should arrive as the pilot group on retreat. The plan is that they will represent diverse medical conditions, income levels, ethnic backgrounds and regions of the country. They will sample not just massage but other integrative therapies such as art therapy, play therapy and meditation.

They will go home knowing what's available for their comfort.

"I think the optimal environment may be one where families can receive the best of Western medicine and also have a chance to explore integrative therapies," Beider said. "And we'd like to invite them back."