

Soft Skills At Work: In business, it's possible to help yourself by helping others

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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The ability to help others is a soft skill employers highly value. And when that attribute is central to the mission of a business, it is uplifting to see in action.

I recently learned of such a business, Edgewater Acupuncture, owned by Meaghan Massella Walker, a licensed acupuncturist. Her goal is to "create a community of healing and treat as many people as I can."

Meaghan has established a community acupuncture practice where people stay together during their treatments. As she explained it, no one gets undressed and everyone relaxes in the same room. Families come together and can sit side by side. There is white noise so that conversations can't be overheard, but some people bring head phones. There is a common purpose of healing, and most of her patients come to prefer that setting.

"It fosters a sense of community," Meaghan said.

This concept was new to me so I paid Meaghan a visit last month to learn more about her business model and why it is important to her to help others.

Meaghan's interest started when she took a community acupuncture class while she was still seeing patients in private rooms. Licensed since 2007, it had been extremely difficult to get new clients. She came to understand that it was hard to get patients because it is unaffordable for so many people, and this concept seemed like a good solution.

"Most people have never had acupuncture," Meaghan said. "Few people have insurance that covers acupuncture. It is beyond the reach of the average person."

That is why Meaghan offers a sliding scale where patients themselves choose what to pay on the scale. It made sense to her to help the majority of the population with an affordable price range.

Following that class, Meaghan's mission became to "provide acupuncture to people at a rate they can afford to receive treatment as often as necessary." She now has two locations, the main office in Edgewater and the other in Pasadena.

Meaghan is passionate about making acupuncture available to everyone and she clearly enjoys her work. She spoke of a woman who came in with severe pain.

"She (the patient) thought she would be wheelchair-bound because of the pain," Meaghan said. "Through treatment she became so much better."

Meaghan was reflective when asked how helping her patients affects her.

"I consider it a privilege to be there for them. It makes me feel what I'm doing matters," Meaghan said. "I love it when someone comes in with stress. One-half hour later it's changed their world."

Developing a sense of community is important to her as well. One way she accomplishes that is through her focus on helping her neighbors.

"This is my community. I live here," she said. "It's to my benefit to be surrounded by happier and healthier people, people that I know."

Meaghan has done community outreach to let people try acupuncture. She thought of people who work really hard and are in stressful situations and wanted to be able to offer a day to get treatment. She chose police, firefighters and military personnel and held a free day for them.

She also loves treating the elderly and has gone to senior centers in Annapolis and Edgewater to give talks and free treatments.

"They need it and tend to be in pain," Meaghan said. "They respond really well to treatment. Generally kids respond really well, too."

While she finds helping others rewarding, there is of course the need to make sure her business is sustainable. Her goal for 2011 is ambitious, hoping to give 5,011 treatments. But she knows if patients need to come in three times a week, they can afford it. She feels this model is a win-win for everyone.

"Business doesn't have to be just about making money," she said. "You can help people and make money."

Her compassion was clearly evident when I spoke with her and she understands that helping others is a soft skill to live and embrace.

CONNECT! Coalition

CONNECT! partner the Fort Meade Employment Readiness Program and other sponsors are hosting the Fort Meade Community Teen Job Fair from 3-6 p.m. March 3 at the McGill Training Center. Soft skills workshops, called "Quick Career Tip Sessions," will run throughout the event with a focus on communication skills and working a job fair. Call 301-677-5590 for more information.

In an effort to spread the word about the importance of soft skills, CONNECT! now has a website hosted by the Baltimore Washington Corridor Chamber Foundation. The site includes soft skills resources, a list of trainers in the Baltimore-Washington area, downloads such as a poster featuring soft skills desired by employers, and a word search to help youth and adults identify qualities all employers expect in their workers. Go to www.bwcc.org/page/CONNECT!

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