A Circle of Healing

For Shay Beider, integrative medicine has been the vehicle through which she serves hundreds of children with chronic, acute, and life-limiting illnesses through her non-profit Integrative Touch for Kids (ITK) program and the healing retreats it holds annually. Through ITK, Beider brings together health-care professionals and physicians to work in tandem on each child and their families. “Our retreats are about healing transformations,” she says. “Since our inception, we’ve been trying to demonstrate a whole new model of health and healing. We’re not only using all the integrative therapies on the children, we’re including their whole family. When we’re working with kids with special needs, we’re working with families with special needs, and even larger, the community with special needs.”

To address them all, the children and their families are offered a variety of therapies from volunteer health-care workers during the healing retreats; community volunteers and their families come to help with things like kids’ activities, cooking, etc. The result, Beider says, is a synergistic circle of healing. The story of one family’s experience at Beider’s ITK retreat exemplifies the potential impact when the community gets involved in this integrative model. “One volunteer and her three children came to the retreat. Her daughter was terrified initially of some conjoined twins who were there. She was so impacted she was almost ready to pass out. By the end of the week, she was brushing the twins’ hair and doting on them. The volunteer’s other daughter had an equally profound experience. There was a girl with cerebral palsy in a wheelchair at camp that she became very close with. When the volunteer’s daughter went back to school, some of her friends were picking on a boy with cerebral palsy in their class. She told her friends it wasn’t acceptable and she got her friends to change their behavior. Because she modeled this accepting behavior so well, they changed how they treated this boy. Finally, with acupressure techniques the volunteer mother learned while at the retreat, she was able to diminish her third daughter’s ongoing ‘anxiety issues.’ She learned a component of integrative medicine for her family’s well-being.”

Beider says sometimes the shift is small, sometimes large. “We had a young girl with cerebral palsy visit us. Her father felt a tremendous amount of shame about his daughter. There was a social stigma and he felt very self-conscious about taking her out. On the last day of the retreat, this father expressed how the experience had changed him entirely. He said he was going to take his daughter to Starbucks. ‘I’m proud of my daughter and I can take her anywhere.’ That child’s whole quality of life will be shifted by that experience. Imagine all the implications from that one shift he made. He will be sharing her with more people. She had a beautiful light about her and more people will experience that light.”

What started with therapeutic integration has turned into something more, Beider says. “We saw the service model was a cyclical loop. The families are teaching us as much as we are supporting them. They’ve taught us how to create support for them and create better communities.”

The healing, however, comes not just from the therapies, but also from the relationships that are formed during the retreat. Beider says preliminary research they are doing with the families they serve is showing that it’s not only about the therapy, but also the relationships that are nurtured and created with other family members and with therapists. For the latter, she says there is a presence involved that makes certain therapeutic relationships special. “It’s something quite deep, sometimes irrespective of the therapy.”