



CONNECTICUT CENTER FOR MASSAGE THERAPY

Massage Across America

By Lorraine Gengo

"I can go as far as to say that a massage therapist saved my life," asserts Annie Powell, who, in 2003, was alerted to a malignant mole on her back by Scott Raymond, an instructor at the Connecticut Center for Massage Therapy, where Powell herself had trained to be a massage therapist.

During an instructor-student massage, Raymond noticed the suspicious-looking mole, and after the session he gently asked Powell if she would like him to take a picture of it using her cell phone. Powell, who was then 26, was already no stranger to skin cancer. Two years before she had been diagnosed with basal cell carcinoma, the most common and benign form of skin cancer, and had had two areas of skin removed. Based on what her dermatologist told her about the mole Raymond detected—a stage-one melanoma about to progress to the next stage—he performed a life-saving service by speaking up and encouraging Powell to seek a professional opinion.

"He's my hero," says Powell, who five years and 200 biopsies later is now a stage-three melanoma patient. "I had a tumor in my back so deep it took three surgeries to get it out." But it would have gone undetected if Raymond hadn't mentioned what he observed on her skin's surface.

"I was in a relationship with someone who never noticed the mole on my back," Powell relates. "It's important for the public to realize that a massage therapist looks at your body objectively, and that massage therapy isn't a luxury, but can actually facilitate your awareness about a very, very serious medical condition."

Though it is less common than other types, affecting about 50,000 Americans each year, melanoma is by far the deadliest form of skin cancer. That's because it is more likely to metastasize, spreading to other organs, lymph tissue and into the bloodstream. Early detection is critical in treating melanoma, because it is very aggressive and spreads quickly. Dermatologists diagnose approximately 850,000 cases of basal cell carcinoma each year, and an additional 250,000 cases of squamous cell carcinoma—both of which are less likely to metastasize, but can nevertheless cause disfiguration and structural damage if untreated.

With skin cancer on the rise, Powell says that her personal experience made her realize how the 300,000 massage therapists in this country could play an important role in early detection of skin cancer and other serious skin conditions. "Think about the number of lives we can touch," she says. "If we get more educated about skin conditions we can really save lives."

A native of Wolcott, Conn., Powell now has her own massage therapy practice in Palm Beach Florida. Her career has shifted gears to include The Skin Project, an organization she formed with Raymond to educate massage therapy students and massage therapists around the country about skin cancer and other skin conditions. Though she is still waiting for the federal government to approve its non-profit status, Powell says she's been able to move ahead with The Skin Project thanks to the generosity of one of her clients, Zvi Levin, who has funded all the business expenses of the undertaking.

The Skin Project will launch in three phases, according to Powell. Phase one involves developing a curriculum about skin cancer and other skin conditions that may be piloted at Connecticut Center for Massage Therapy. Powell hopes the curriculum will be adopted by CCMT and other massage therapy schools around the country. The curriculum will not only include the topics of skin cancer awareness and prevention, but also how to broach the subject to clients with confidence and compassion. Powell says that it was Raymond's handling of the situation that helped her as much as the warning. "His approach was so direct and at the

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same time it was so gentle,” she recalls. “I really felt that he was there for me, and he made himself available.”

The second phase of the project is to travel to massage therapy schools around the country to introduce the new curriculum and to round up volunteers for the project’s third phase—Massage Across America. This leg of the journey Powell expects will kick off this summer in Connecticut. This volunteer-driven effort aims to raise public awareness of skin cancer and the role that massage therapy can play as a gateway to early detection. Powell’s benefactor has funded an RV so that she can travel across the country, and her uncle, the chief financial officer of a major restaurant chain, has made arrangements so that Massage Across America will be able to set up in the restaurants’ parking lots when it comes to town. Powell says that Massage Across America volunteers will provide free chair massage, along with free sunscreen donated by the World Skin Cancer Foundation, to people who turn out to these events.

Annie Powell is scheduled to appear on Good Morning America on May 23rd to publicize Massage Across America. For more information on The Skin Project, go to theskinproject.org.