

The History of the San Diego Reiki Corps and the Sharp Memorial Hospital Volunteer Program

In the beginning...

That's where any good history starts, isn't it?

In the beginning...it was dark and formless and empty.

And then there was light; light bringing hope and structure and promise.

In the beginning I was interested in Reiki when I took a road trip with a group going to hear a speaker in Los Angeles. This was almost 20 years ago. As we traveled I saw the results of Reiki, healing a young woman who practiced it all day, taking a wicked-looking cut on her finger in the morning to a fading pink line by nightfall. When I asked how she did that, she said, "It's Reiki." I was hooked.

I had a fabulous Reiki teacher, one of the most kick-ass honest and unconditionally loving people I have ever known. Learning from her was one of the defining experiences of my life because Reiki has taught me what it means to be a useful tool to Spirit. As part of my learning, it was required that I practice Reiki on three people a week for three weeks of the cleanse period. Big problem, I mean REALLY BIG problem for me.

While La Jolla boasted brainiacs in all kinds of fields of art and science, it had yet to accept things like acupuncture and other things groovy. I didn't know anyone who didn't look at me a bit askance when I asked if they would like a Reiki session. My dad half-heartedly called it voodoo; I say half-heartedly because he hoped it was a phase that would pass quickly and because he didn't really understand what I was doing. Why would I want to put my hands on strangers; what was the purpose? There were doctors who would take care of diseases. I didn't need to mess with them. There were no lines between religion and spirituality at that time. You were either a Catholic, or an Episcopalian (me), or a Baptist, or a Jew, or you weren't. If you were a Buddhist, you weren't from around here. I say all this because there is tendency for people to think that however it (meaning the situation) is in the present, that's the way it always was. For example I'd opine that if the notion that the color of your skin doesn't matter, you were probably born after 1973 because I can tell you for certain in 1964 when blacks got the right to vote, I was stunned that they had to earn it. I thought everyone who lived in America had the right to vote. I had a certain naiveté back in the day.

Trying to fulfill my requirements, I asked around and nobody but nobody wanted to be "Reiki'd". At that time my friend Gloria Gonzalez ran (and still runs today) a healing fitness center in town called Eight Elements West. She had lots of people, clients and such, that she could work on. She asked who among them were willing to receive from me. Not so many takers. Gloria was known; I was not. Then a mutual friend suggested that a friend of hers, a social worker, was going through some hardship and might like to try it. She had asked for compassionate and reverent healing to help her through her cancer experience. Reiki fit the bill. Glo and I showed up weekly, often separately, sometimes together, to offer Reiki to her. This went on for about six months.

If you know her today, the words fierce, loyal, compassionate, strong, are just some that may come to mind. If you met her then, words like fragile, slight, breakable or insubstantial might have come to mind. She was so ill, I was at first nervous. I honestly thought, "What do I think I am doing here"... and then I stopped thinking. Because when I was thinking, I was within me. I, I, I. Reiki isn't about me. I am too small in my mind for the use Spirit can make of me when I am willing and stop thinking.

In the hours spent with her, there was a profound sweet silence that would hold us in Its space. Sometimes I wondered how she made it to the door. Other times, I would wonder if we were turning a corner for the good. As with any truly enriching experience, it became sweeter as I look back. But I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge something greater than any of us was at work to teach us about sacred grace, patience, giving up of self for the betterment of another, that determination and forgiveness were partners in healing. There was much self-examination, which, if you've done any, you know is not for wimps. We were strengthened and we were loved.

The social worker, who had not abandoned western medicine but integrated the Reiki into her treatments, healed. Healthy, to the point that this extraordinary person went back to the cancer floor of 8 North in Sharp Memorial Hospital to again take up her duties and responsibilities as a licensed clinical social worker. But once you have learned to see, you can't "not see". She was seeing things differently.

Glo said it was clear that she had to express a deep yearning to share the God-Life connection she had dedicated herself to, the one that made her such a wonderful healer of the dying. Talk about true patience. Sometime after her recovery, Glo approached her with some thoughts she had expressed during our sessions. She asked her if she would like the two of us to bring "God" to the hospital in the form of Reiki sessions for her patients. A light went on. There was hope. And with that hope I began to dream of being able to support those who were in need of help beyond what medicine could give them.

Glo looked at me and said "Boy, then we better get started because we really are going to have our work cut out for us." The Sharp Memorial Hospital Volunteer Reiki Program grew from there. Never think you can't make a difference. You just have to show up.

After the social worker had a discussion with floor manager, things moved easily. For the next year Glo and I showed up at Sharp Memorial every other week and did Reiki on the patients that the social worker had talked to earlier that day. She would assess their situation, with a clinical and experiential eye, and offer them education on Reiki. If the patient consented, Glo and I would work on them based on a list she would create.

It was good for us to have each other on the floor as we offered the sessions. Neither of us is a social worker, though Glo had gotten her degree in Kinesiology at the University of Maryland and of course her current career made her very body minded. She was always interested in the social worker's case assessment and in sharing her experience. We'd leave notes to her next to the patients' name on the list, telling her what we experienced with that person. Sometimes, especially in the early days and months we worked, the very life and death situation for some of these patients would get to us. To look into the eyes of someone facing death is challenging enough. To see the fear in that person's son or wife or best friend is not something either of us had trained to deal with. Doing the Reiki never bothered either of us.

Accepting that there couldn't always be a happy ending made demands of a different kind. Being friends as well as fellow practitioners gave us someone to talk to, vent with, pray with, and made it easier to walk out of the hospital knowing we had done what good we could.

At the end of that year, we three blondi-blonds sat together satisfied with what we were doing but though we hadn't said anything to each other I think we knew there was more yet to do.

Glo asked the social worker how she wanted to grow this dream of ours. Her humble gratefulness could not see past our 2-person team, so Glo challenged her to express herself without fear, and she finally did. Her dream? "No drugs, no surgeries, no doctors, nurses, equipment. Just Reiki, 24-7, people healing" she defiantly stated.

One of us said "Too bad we can't get more people than just the two of us to offer Reiki here at the hospital." The second light turned on. And the structure began to form.

By this time I had become an Usui Reiki Master. Glo had completed Level II and was encouraging her clients to receive sessions and go on to be students if they were so guided. We kept the new floor manager in the loop and she was enthusiastic enough to sponsor the first Reiki class. I taught; 5 nurses from 8 North including the social worker (how cool was that) but it wasn't enough. There weren't enough bodies.

I was only one Master funneling her students to Sharp Memorial. What if we could find other Master teachers and have them funnel their students to the hospital? And if we did that, what if those teachers and their students wanted to get together and share what we learned and our different Reiki experiences and just have some fun? What if that could happen? Why I bet there would be hundreds, maybe thousands of students and teachers! And we would teach Reiki and everyone would learn it and the whole world would be a happier healthier community. That could happen, right? I thought so. We made calls, sought out web sites of interest and put out the word in all the ways we could that we wanted a meeting of all Reiki Masters in San Diego. Glo was so supportive and enthusiastic, she would host it at her center.

We were excited. I was so excited. I think 7 people beyond me and Glo showed up. I was still thrilled. Okay, maybe I was hoping for 50 or at least 22 but I was still thrilled. Among those present were Serena and Phil Poisson. I had asked for people to come forward who would support a Reiki community and they did. Lesson learned, when your prayer is answered don't second guess the answer.

The San Diego Reiki Corps was born. My third light turned on. There was the promise. Plant and nurture and blend with the environment and honor the connection between man and Spirit until full harvest shows you fruit. You didn't create the seed nor did you bring it to fruition, but it still feels good to plant and tend and water and pray and Reiki... and watch what grows.

As the volunteer program grew we saw a greater structure was demanded. In any organization, whether it is a company, a building, or an amoeba there are rules for operating and boundaries. We worked to create sustainable means to support something (my dad still called voodoo) that would meet the needs

of the patient, the permission of the doctors, support the nurses, and be doable by the Reiki practitioners. That meant getting a good take on the person volunteering, asking for more than one recommendation and calling those people, as well as a personal one-on-one demonstration to ensure the proper Usui Reiki was that volunteer's foundation. Then there was a trial period to make sure that the volunteer was indeed ready to make a commitment to patients. There's a big difference in doing Reiki with family and friends and then walking into meet someone who's sick and tired and has been poked and prodded and diagnosed all day. And then the volunteer had to go through another hospital orientation with the social worker.

The nurses and the doctors started taking notice. The day shift didn't have as much trouble because the night shift reported that patients were sleeping longer and more deeply, needing less medication, fewer cranky calls and they weren't sure how to explain this part, but the floor seemed lighter, less tiresome, more relaxed.

We found that anyone who questioned us would have most of their fears or arrogance set aside by experiencing Reiki for themselves. We would demonstrate to anyone who asked, a family member, a floor nurse. People became curious, doctors became curious. What was going on in 8 North? Why was the floor less stressed, why were the patients feeling better faster. What was Reiki, who was doing it, and why?

With the social worker leading the way, we went informally to the Oncology Advisory Board to provide a demonstration of the practice. Glo was going to talk about how Reiki affected the various internal body systems, circulation, neural, etc. She was very good with the body stuff particularly to medical people. I waited to get my hands on somebody. No takers. Even though I was the shy retiring one of the duo, I interrupted Glo after the introductions and made my pitch for a demonstration. I said to the various doctors there and said, "Doesn't one of you want to be able to tell me I'm full of it?"

That brought a few chuckles and one brave soul to sit in the chair before me. I told him I would be placing my hands at various positions on his body and would tell him where that was before I moved and that all he really had to do was breathe.

To this day I think he was one of the most open minded people I have ever met in the medical field. He didn't want me to fail nor did he want me to succeed in whatever was going to happen, (he wasn't sure). He simply wanted to see what was going to happen. As Glo talked and I shifted positions, his breathing began to slow. His shoulders dropped, color bloomed in his cheeks, tension flowed out of his legs and his whole body eased deeper into the chair.

When he opened his eyes, he looked at the group and said "I can see no harm whatsoever in offering this technique to those who would ask for it. It's very relaxing."

Glo smiled at me and I lifted my hands and said "Who's next?"

Over the next 13 years the San Diego Reiki Corps and its members continued to offer volunteers to the Sharp Memorial Hospital Volunteer Reiki Program. And what entirely wonderful volunteers they were

and are. The commitment and graciousness each one offers cancer patients and their families truly brings hope, structure, and promise to all who participate. Many of our first volunteers have served each month for over ten years. I'm sure presidents of other organizations feel their volunteers are the best; must be like parents who are sure their kids are the most beautiful and brightest. I know mine are for their spirit shines whenever one of them enters the hospital. No matter how their day has gone, not one of them leaves the hospital that night without a sense of satisfaction and gratitude for being part of a circle of healing and love. Yes, love.

Two years ago I stepped down as the President of the SDRC and Phil Poisson took over. Under Phil's leadership the San Diego Reiki Corps was established as a corporation, organized and operated exclusively for charitable and public purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

We enjoy one of the largest and longest on-going Reiki volunteer programs in the country. As with the entire experience of Reiki and the SDRC, having Phil at the helm demonstrated our right action and growth in the Reiki community and the community at large. Recently due to health considerations, (greatly ameliorated by Reiki) he has stepped down. Personally and as a member of the Corps, I owe Phil Poisson a debt of gratitude for growing and holding the space of this organization.

I also wish to thank Gloria Gonzalez, the social worker, Phil Poisson, and Serena Poisson, for mentoring me and serving as guides on my Reiki journey. It is humbling to have known as many members and volunteers as I have and to have been able to witness their quiet determination to ease the suffering of cancer patients and their families as well as support the staff at Sharp Memorial Hospital. It has been a rare pleasure to have gathered with our wonderful like-minded and gifted Reiki practitioners and masters as we have.

Today, we are looking in new directions. Who knows what the future will bring? What do you see for yourself in the Corps? What do you dream of happening? Bring your ideas and hopes and structure and promise to a gathering. I look forward to seeing you there.

I do know this, with people like you being part of our organization, the best is yet to be.

Ann Van Buskirk
A Founder of the San Diego Reiki Corps
and the Sharp Memorial Hospital Volunteer Reiki Program