



EDUCATION & SEMINARS

AOMA: A Time to Reflect

Pam Ferguson, Dipl. ABT (NCCAOM), AOBTA & GSD-CI, LMT

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Once considered one of the top acupuncture schools in the U.S., AOMA closed its doors in April.
- The deeply emotional closing ceremony on April 5 was attended by scores of alums and teachers of the past three decades.
- Acupuncture and Integrative Medicine College, Berkeley (AIMC, is creating a satellite AIMC campus by leasing part of AOMA's space, and will engage some of AOMA's faculty and admin members so current students can complete their training.

Once considered one of the top acupuncture schools in the U.S., AOMA closed its doors in April. At its peak, the school trained over 300 students annually to master's and doctoral levels. Alas, like other acupuncture schools AOMA was hit by rising costs and low enrollments following COVID.

The deeply emotional closing ceremony on April 5 was attended by scores of alums and teachers of the past three decades to hear from founder Stuart Watts, outgoing CEO/President Mary Faria, and former co-owner Linda Fontaine pay tribute to the school.

Acupuncture and Integrative Medicine College, Berkeley (AIMC) has opened an additional location in Austin, leasing part of AOMA's space, and will engage some of AOMA's faculty and administrators. While AOMA transfer students can complete their training, AIMC plans to permanently operate an Austin location.

Bidding Farewell to an Austin Feature!

AOMA has evolved colorfully over the past three decades in a city like Austin, known for similarly entrepreneurial enterprises such as Whole Foods (that evolved out of a tiny grocery) and Dell (that

evolved out of Michael Dell's dorm room at U.T. Austin and his garage.) Whole Foods, Dell and AOMA all won Austin's fastest-growing business awards from a business journal in 1999 and 2000.

AOMA's gypsy-like origins date back to 1993 when founder Stuart Watts DOM, ND, sold his other creation, SWAC in New Mexico, and bought John Scott, DOM 's clinic in a small house in south Austin. Dr. Watts actually shaped a living space in that garage!

He (and former wife Annie) used to rattle around Austin in a small truck, and I remember the day he told me he could provide acupuncture or teach off the back of it.

Classes evolved out of the clinic with small groups of nine students, prompted initially by state lawyer Leslie Myers, who later completed her LAc and joined the AOMA board while crafting the Texas Acupuncture Association's annual CE seminars. Stuart Watts initiated the annual Southwest CE symposium. Jeanne Evans, LAc, who was there from the beginning draping tables with sheets and running the front office, later combined her admin role with classes, graduated in 1999 and managed one of AOMA's White Crane herbal stores.

With a knack for acquiring an eclectic faculty to teach acupuncture, herbal medicine and ABT, and to craft student clinics, Stuart Watts later imported stunning professors mainly from Chengdu, most of them MDs (China): to name a few, Drs. Guoen Wang, Yuxin and Pan He, and Dongxin Ma. Later arrivals included Drs. Xiaotian Shen, Yuxia Qiu, Zhongling Zhang and Yaoping (Violet) Song. Many developed private practices in Austin. Stuart also hired Raja Mandyam, MD, as head of biomedical sciences.

AOMA graduate Robert Laguna, LAc, MSOM (a 1997 grad) spent years on the faculty, and his bilingual skills were an essential asset in offsite clinics (a topic for my next column).

A Shift to Integrative Medicine

Stuart Watts sold AOMA to a partnership formed by Linda Fontaine, who was enrolled as a student at the time (2001), a tenured university professor who had been to China in the late 1970s, and included one of AOMA's long-term faculty members.

Subsequent presidents included retired USAF Colonel Jimmie Coombes, who helped direct the accreditation process; followed by Will Morris, PhD, DAOM, LAc and Betty Edmond, MD. Both Dr. Edmond and Dr. Faria (who joined AOMA in 2018) spent years as hospital administrators, a move toward developing a fully integrative training program, honoring the name change from "Academy of Oriental Medicine at Austin" to "AOMA Graduate School of Integrative Medicine" some 20 years ago; a move that also honored the Asian American communities' request for organizations to replace the racist/colonial term *oriental* with *Asian*. The familiar name AOMA lives on.

AOMA and ABT

When I joined the faculty in 1996 to develop *zen shiatsu* and an AOBTA-compliant ABT program (including *tuina* and MQG), AOMA moved to the Village Center in north Austin into a cluster of offices and shop fronts dotted around a delightful *koi* pond and stone courtyard. At that time, the library was a closet above Stuart Watts' desk.

Our classes, *qigong*, and my student clinics were always on display to the community, especially when we acquired a lovely corner space surrounded by windows as our dojo. Intrigued passers-by would gawp, then wander over to the professional and student clinics for acupuncture, herbal medicine and ABT sessions.

AOMA moved out of the Village Center in North Austin to a stand-alone beautiful campus in South Austin in 2010, complete with a courtyard and central fountain!

To this day, Stuart Watts wonders why his obsession with excellent ABT as being essential to a school of acupuncture is still so unique among his peers. He insisted that all his ABT teachers become certified instructors of the AOBTA, as AOMA was part of the organization's Council of Schools and Programs. AOMA's ABT program enabled students to become AOBTA certified and able to start an ABT practice years before they acquired their LAc.

"Practitioners have to know how to touch and feel *qi*. It's malpractice to needle without bodywork," Watts told me recently. He has spent years on the AOBTA Board of Directors, currently serving as treasurer.

AOMA leaves behind a strong and inspiring legacy, loved by an eclectic local and global community.

Editor's Note: Pam was dean of Asian Bodywork Therapy at AOMA from 1996-2004, and continued to teach a class in ethics until 2019. She recently donated her teaching archives to U.T. Austin's Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports.

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