



CHINESE & ASIAN MEDICINE

Peer Points: Always Seeking To Grow

STORIES OF PRACTICE SUCCESS

Brenda Duran

Ellen "Kiki" Geary has spent the last decade honing her craft. As a specialist in integrative holistic care, she went straight from completing her master's degree in acupuncture and chinese herbal medicine from Bastyr University to building a successful and thriving practice in the small community of Anacortes, Washington.

As the founder of her own practice, she has always looked for other opportunities to expand and eventually went straight into also becoming an entrepreneur and teacher of her craft. For the past few years, she has focused her time and energy into helping herbalists get their products out in the market and also on building an organization that produces organic herbs for other acupuncturists, as well as innovative moxa boxes.

Geary spoke to *Acupuncture Today* about the essential lessons she has learned as an entrepreneur and business owner and how outside success begins with looking inward first.

AT: Can you tell us how you developed the skills you needed to build a practice?

EG: I think the most important quality to develop for building a practice is confidence. While confidence is not exactly a skill, I do think it is something that can be developed. Confidence is what will keep you showing up everyday in the face of great doubt or uncertainty. It is also what relates a sense of ease to patients and allows them to relax and participate. If they don't think you can lead them where they are trying to go, your practice won't survive. I don't think anyone begins their practice with total confidence in their clinical skills but one must have a deep, inherent confidence in themselves as a sincere person and then just set out to do their very best. Boldness and taking risks is helpful in business but true confidence comes from somewhere else. You have to learn that you are

willing to do whatever it takes to be a truthful person. If that is in place, nothing else can really phase you. Confidence in your clinical skills can only be established through education and experience. The most critical experience for me was going to China. I spent three months immersed in the hospitals, seeing a high volume of patients. Once I understood that the head of the departments in Chengdu, who had been practicing for 50 years, prescribe the same formulas I had been taught at Bastyr, I knew my education had value and that I could trust my base and get to work.



AT: Tell us about how you started your business from scratch. What are some of the important steps you took?

EG: I gave myself a deadline to start working after graduation because I knew if I waited too long, I might get psyched out. I started out very simply and without much vision. I didn't have a business plan, funding or a model of what I hoped to build. (Though I would suggest that anyone starting out develop all three of these things.) I literally just chose a community, rented some office space and threw up my shingle. For the first six months, I treated anyone who would let me. I just wanted to be practicing. This turned out to be the best way to introduce the medicine to the people where I lived. When my patient volume began to grow, I made a clear decision to simply be as good as a practitioner as I could be and assume the rest would work itself out. It did, but 10 years later, I realized I needed to work smarter if I wanted to evolve my service. By that time, I had established a reputation in my community and a solid foundation. I custom built a clinic that better represents what we do and has more style and space to grow. Building a practice really just means you have the tenacity to show up everyday and just keep working. You must be motivated by a calling of Chinese Medicine but you also have to sincerely love your patients. They can tell if you are genuinely there because you are rooting for them to succeed and overcome their challenges. I'm naturally both stubborn and sentimental. I think it is a good combination for success.

AT: How did you decide to branch out of your practice and begin marketing moxa boxes?

EG: When I was in school, I was totally dissatisfied with how moxa treatment was being delivered. Potency, safety and patient accessibility were generally lacking. I was also deeply concerned about the decline in the use and practice of moxibustion as Oriental Medicine grew in the West. It is a problem I have always had a passion to solve. When my neighbor saw me harvesting the mugwort to make moxa for our clinic, he inquired as to what I was up to. As a carpenter and aspiring healer, he was more than intrigued. I told him my idea and we set to work almost immediately on developing a prototype for the box.

AT: What advice would you give other practitioners who are looking to branch out and begin selling their own products?

EG: All business success comes down to one thing, persistence. Inspiration, creativity and intelligence can be exciting but persistence and willingness to work are truly what will matter at the end. As for getting started, ask for help, take care of your health, keep a balanced perspective on what you are doing and don't ever give up.

AT: When it came time to market yourself as an acupuncturist in your Washington community, how did you go about doing this?

EG: I have actually never marketed my business. Being in a small town for 13 years, "word of mouth" referrals have been enough. The doctors know who I am because their patients report results back to them. I would say that 40% to 50% of my referrals come from the medical community. Building a network based on professional respect and patient driven care is the most important thing and will give enduring results. Admittedly, I have been cheap and lazy about advertising, but that's foolish. I think well delivered marketing works and recommend it to people who want to get the word out about what they are doing.

AT: As an acupuncture business owner what are some mistakes you made early on?

EG: Being resistant to the business itself was my biggest limitation. If you are going to do anything, it will be most successful if you fully embrace it. I have made the mistake of wasting energy resisting the

inevitable elements of running a successful business. Get the software you need. Get the best bookkeeper in town. Hire front desk staff and medical billers if you take insurance. Realize that the sooner you can begin to collaborate with other practitioners the better. Never isolate yourself and don't get caught in a common trap of competitiveness. Working with peers and having the support of your colleagues will nourish you. Seeing patients is a tough job and supporting the positivity of your own experience is essential.

AT: As an acupuncturist, what is the latest trend in your practice that you think is affecting the way acupuncturists do business these days?

EG: It is easy to get cynical or bogged down by business structures, insurance coding and the politics of medicine. Choose where you put your attention. For me, bringing opportunity to my colleagues, letting other people's talent inspire me and focusing on being a great resource for my community are what motivate me. Those are the trends that I am allowing to affect how I do business.

AT: You've managed to have a steady flow of patients through the years. What do you think has been the key?

EG: The key is results. Period. Take your patients seriously and strive to help them define and meet their goals. Be impeccably honest even if it seems difficult. It is what your reputation will depend on. I have always had the opportunity to see a lot of patients. That could be called luck but really, it is only because it has been a personal priority.

AT: In your practice, what are the most common health issues you are seeing these days ?

EG: These days we see a lot of fertility, acute pain syndromes and unfortunately a high rate of cancer patients. I also start hearing sighs from my front desk when we start writing the words "anxiety, stress reaction and insomnia" too much!

AT: What are some of the Traditional Chinese Medicine principles you personally follow to achieve success?

EG: Chinese medicine has been a huge blessing in my life. I realized in my first year of practice that if I didn't manage my own health, I wouldn't be able to practice properly. I am a dedicated meditator and I think that is the cornerstone to my success as a human and as a practitioner. I don't know if this is a true quote from the classics but I picked this concept up somewhere along the way: "If you can't heal it with breath, try meditation. If you can't heal it with meditation, try exercise. If you can't heal it with exercise, try nutrition. If you can't heal it with food, try herbs. If you can't heal it with herbs, try moxa. If you can't heal it with moxa, try acupuncture." This is something I think of everyday and try to provide to my patients as a model of how to approach life and retain potential.

AT: What do you think is the most important business lesson most acupuncturists need to learn to succeed in today's world?

EG: "Be generous first" is the most important tenet of business but most acupuncturists will defer to that naturally. So I will expand on that and say if your goal is to have an enduring business, you need to learn practicality. Having an organization that works day in and day out it requires systems. You must be organized and consistent.

AT: What has been the greatest business lesson you have learned?

EG: "Nothing will work unless you do." - Maya Angelou.

AT: What tips would you give seasoned acupuncturists still trying to find their niche?

EG: Don't strive to be clever. Strive to fulfill yourself and be happy. It will take time but if you develop yourself properly to bring forth your true nature, your work will be authentic and will have a quality that will resonate with people. Most importantly, you will never feel confused by your outcomes.

Do you have a story of practice success you would like to share with the acupuncture community?

Email bduran@mpamedia.com and get in touch.

SEPTEMBER 2014