

Connections

By Kate Corkery Spencer

“When you’re going through hell, keep going,” Winston Churchill once advised. It’s good advice and something that life, with all its various challenges, offers us the chance to practice at regular intervals. Every day, someone loses a job or ends a relationship or receives a life-changing diagnosis. Each of these experiences can be hellish, at least initially. But often, in the end, these same challenges become the greatest gift, moving us from simply being alive to genuinely living with joy and gratitude.

Ruthie Hardee knows something about those gifts. Hardee is the founder of Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy, a specialized form of effleurage bodywork done with the feet. One defining difference in Hardee’s method is that the work is done with the therapist standing on a table holding on to bars that are suspended from the ceiling. Although the name suggests ties to the ancient Asian Ashiatsu (barefoot shiatsu) and traditional Chinese medicine, Hardee’s work is fundamentally Western in nature and scope.

As a girl, Hardee fully expected to follow in the professional footsteps of her parents. Hardee’s father practiced tropical medicine for 20 years in the Congo; her mother worked alongside him as a nurse. Hardee planned to become a physician herself, but life had other plans for her.

One of those plans included working as a production assistant on the set of the television sitcom, *Married With Children*. When a writer’s strike temporarily shut down production, Hardee pursued her longtime interest in health care and enrolled in massage school. After graduating, she returned to the set of *Married With Children*, doing massage part time.

When the show went on summer hiatus, Hardee worked as a production assistant on feature films. In the down time, she offered massage to the cast and crew, setting up a table in the back of the grip truck of her then-boyfriend, an electrician. Many of the people she worked on, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, were athletes and bodybuilders who demanded deep work. As much as Hardee loved doing bodywork, the work was taking a toll on her own body. Born with scoliosis and suffering from herniated discs, Hardee was in nearly constant pain doing traditional massage.

“I was killing myself,” she says of her former practice. “I had shooting pains down my arms and terrible low-back pain.”

Hardee feared she wouldn’t be able to continue as a massage therapist. But one day, a life gift arrived in the form of a very large man.

“It was the end of the day and I was really tired,” Hardee recalls. “This big guy with a pinched nerve came in for some work. Within the first five minutes I knew I couldn’t do it. So, I improvised. I hopped up on the table, held on to the grids of the truck’s ceiling, and started to walk on his back.”

The next day, a line formed outside the truck with people waiting to sign up for this new style of massage. Hardee was booked solid for the rest of the summer, and the seeds of a new idea were planted.

“I thought I was really on to something with the barefoot massage,” says Hardee. “But I quickly found there was no school that taught students to do this footwork with bars over their heads. They all teach mat work. So I just started taking special courses and reading and gaining information. I gave out over 3,000 free massages in one year in exchange for consultations with orthopedic surgeons and chiropractors.”

The end result was the development of a curriculum that was approved by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork and recognized by the American Medical Association. With her program established, Hardee was fast on her way to becoming one of the most popular instructors in the country. But around that same time she received another life gift. This one arrived in the potentially devastating form of cancer.

“It was cervical cancer that had gone into the uterus,” says Hardee. “I couldn’t believe it because I felt great, looked great and thought I was healthier than I’d ever been. I guess that’s why it’s called a silent killer.”

At the age of 40, Hardee had expected to marry and raise a family. Instead, she had a complete hysterectomy. Yet once again, out of the crisis came new life.

“The students I teach are my kids,” says Hardee. “I give and receive so much nurturing with them. Teaching really has become a mothering thing for me.”

And her students are reaping the rewards of Hardee's maternal instincts. To date, Hardee has trained more than 1400 students in her method. With classes limited to only eight students, personal attention is maximized. Originally conceived as a means for petite therapists like Hardee to save their hands and backs while continuing to offer deep work, the physical demands of Hardee's method has also helped larger therapists lose weight and become physically stronger and more fit. And because it is a specialized treatment, the income potential is high. Hardee sees herself as representative of many therapists seeking a better life and livelihood—and she's committed to helping others find that life.

"I'm in my '40s, single, crippled with scoliosis and shortened muscles that give me pain," says Hardee. "And I can't work for someone else ever again. This work allows me to make a C.E.O.'s income, get a better body, have fun and help other therapists do the same."

With her optimism and resilience, Hardee has made the most of life's gifts. She's living proof that just beyond the hell we may be going through is a heaven on the other side.

For more information on Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy and certification training, go to www.deepfeet.com, email Ruthie Hardee at ruthie@deepfeet.com or call (303) 300-2511.