

massage & bodywork

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spotlight on education—vivian taormina

BY KARRIE OSBORN

GOLDEN THUMBS, GOLDEN TOES

When her family gathered for the holidays, a young Vivian Taormina would circle the dinner table, putting her nimble hands to work on the kinked necks and sore shoulders of extended family members.

“My aunt would grab my hands from her shoulders and pull them in front of her and inspect my fingers and thumbs,” says Taormina, now a 31-year-old New Jersey businesswoman. “She wondered what made those hands so special, and ‘golden thumbs’ is what she called them.”

Taormina would come to learn that those same hands could help her earn a good living, and eventually made the decision to pursue massage school at a point in her life she calls a career crossroad. With several employment paths behind her, Taormina remembered the massage file she’d been keeping for years and her aunt’s words. The decision to enroll in a massage training program seemed both logical and true to her heart.

Shortly into her six-month massage program, Taormina says her instructors gave students the tough talk about the average brevity of an MT’s career. For her, it was an eye-opener. “I thought it only smart to explore many different modalities on a personal level, but also use these opportunities as research into what I felt drawn to study more in-depth.” She says she was not about to buy into the expectation to fail, and did everything she could to ensure it didn’t happen. Learning Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy was a big factor in finding a successful path.

After seeing a picture of the barefoot Ashiatsu technique, Taormina knew it was for her. Not only was it a great marketing niche, but she recognized the work—which has therapists delivering massage with their feet while supporting their weight on overhead bars—as something that would utilize more of her body, without relying solely on her hands.

“I was not even out of massage school yet and I was already thinking about self-care,” she says. “I made an appointment to receive Ashiatsu and again solidified my desire to learn it. It was amazing.” Taormina knew if she could get her clients to feel as she did during the Ashiatsu session, she would be successful. “The therapist’s feet felt like a huge soft hand, as if my entire body was being worked on all at the same time. There’s so much smooth, even pressure, the body just has no choice but to relax.”

“For me, working with my feet is like dancing, or tai chi, for the massage table.”

Vivian Taormina,
Ashiatsu Oriental Bar
Therapy practitioner

FILLING HER TOOLBOX

Taormina was serious about making Ashiatsu a successful component in her bodywork toolbox. “So when the website said ‘must be able to hold yourself up with hands by your ears for 20 seconds’ (for the advanced training), I started increasing my workouts at the gym to include pull-ups.” Taormina was so impressed with the technique that she signed up for advance Ashiatsu classes as well.

Today, as owner of TaoMassage in Ocean Township, New Jersey, Taormina says Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy is a big part of her practice, when she now uses golden toes along with her golden thumbs. “It’s truly the only modality that I would like to use on a daily basis,” she says. “Some days are filled with more hands-on versus feet-on clients, and I miss using my feet on those days. For me, working with my feet is like dancing, or tai chi, for the massage table.”

Taormina, who is also a certified instructor of Kripalu Yoga Dance and the director/producer of the stage production *Birth*, says continuing education—whether 20 years into a career, or two months—is critical for keeping fresh and inspired about your work as a massage therapist. “After the first 1,000 massages, you have to stay connected to yourself and the work you do. Continuing education is a service for yourself and your clients that keeps you active and engaged—physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.”

EXTENDING THEIR CAREERS

Ruthie Hardee, founder of Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy, says 60 percent of the bodyworkers who enroll in her continuing education (CE) classes



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come to class already injured. “Most are in private practice, specializing in deep tissue. Their backs and wrists just can’t take any more, no matter how many CE courses they’ve tried that claim hands-free.” With Ashiatsu, therapists learn how to extend their career and save their hands. Hardee says the other 40 percent come through her doors because they crave a fun and interesting CE class. “They don’t want CE to be merely a process, or a hoop to jump through, which does not increase their knowledge base.”

After completing all the advanced levels of Ashiatsu, Taormina says she was both fulfilled and better armed with techniques and knowledge to really help her clients. At the same time, she knew her career would not fall victim to injury or overuse. But even with this heavy weapon in her bodywork arsenal, Taormina hasn’t stopped adding to her skill set. She’s expanding her business to include skin care and facials, she’s exploring the world of Thai massage, and she’s beginning to host community wellness events.

Still, it’s Ashiatsu and its deep-compression effleurage strokes that make up at least half of her business. “Financially, it has impacted my business tremendously,” she says. “Offering Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy also continues to educate people that there is a safe barefoot modality that exists and is available to the public, that is both corrective and therapeutic.” **m&b**

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