



providing a healing haven

CONNIE HERRICK BUILDS A SPECIAL CLINIC

by Ashby Semple Photographs by Anne Hamersky

AS YOU WALK INTO the Charlotte Maxwell Complementary Clinic in Oakland, California, you notice two giant quilts composed of squares made by the women who have been treated there, squares that say things like “Thank you, CMCC,” “God is there” and “Peace.” The clinic provides free complementary medical therapies—such as acupuncture, Chinese and western herbs, homeopathy, massage and visualization techniques—to low-income women who are simultaneously undergoing conventional treatment for cancer.

The facility feels more like a home than a hospital. A cozy waiting room, decorated with Tibetan prayer flags and stocked with donated organic produce and breads, is a place where women linger, swapping stories and creating a sense of community essential for the clients, many of whom have nowhere else to go for support during one of the most difficult time of their lives. A

full-time staff of six, some of whom started at the clinic as patients themselves, coordinate over 150 volunteer practitioners. The hours are long, the work is demanding and the commitment level is supremely high. And until recently, when a recurrence forced her to take a break, Connie Herrick was at the heart of it all.

Born to a Japanese mother and an American father, Herrick talks openly about her life, her tenure at CMCC and her own struggle against cancer. Her manner is easy, smart, funny. You get the sense that if you were falling, Herrick would catch you and hold on for as long as it took for you to stand back up on your own. In other words, she is the kind of person you want in charge.

The irony is that Herrick would never have known anything about the clinic were it not for her own cancer. At the University of San Francisco, she majored in communications. After graduating (as valedictorian of her class), she was hired to be KMEL 106FM’s marketing director just as it was emerging as the premier rock station in the Bay Area. Those were heady days “We walked around town in these satin baseball jackets, working the party scene, eating at all the best restaurants. I was only 21 and didn’t have a clue.”

In 1983, she decided she needed “to get serious” and returned to USF for her MBA. She was working as the director of marketing communications at a large transportation company when she discovered a lump in her left breast. “It was the day after my son’s first birthday, December 21, 1991. I was 33 years old.” The biopsy was inconclusive, but her doctor urged her to have the tumor removed immediately as it was growing quickly. Indeed, she had Stage II invasive ductal carcinoma with a grade 3 tumor and negative lymph nodes.

Most of 1992 was spent battling cancer: a lumpectomy, followed by six months of biweekly chemo treatments, then five weeks of radiation, five times a week. “My husband, Mark, had to take care of everything. I was sick as a dog. And the anti-nausea drugs made me a walking zombie. I lost depth perception; I couldn’t park a car; I couldn’t work a calculator. I had an MBA in statistics, and I couldn’t even figure out how to add. Meanwhile, I had this baby who needed me. It was very frustrating and frightening.”

A friend recommended she see Sally Savitz, an acupuncturist in Oakland. Skeptical but willing to try anything, Herrick scheduled an appointment. Savitz immediately began to work on bolstering Herrick’s damaged immune system, and then began to work on her nausea. In less than a month, Herrick was off the anti-nausea drugs completely. “It was pretty profound. My oncologist said, ‘Whatever you’re doing, keep doing it, because you’re doing great.’ That’s when I became a believer in complementary medicine. I believe in using everything you can to survive.”

At that time, Savitz was just starting the CMCC with fellow acupuncturist Beverly Burns, running the nascent program out of their office on weekends. Herrick volunteered and was soon appointed to the board of directors. In November 2002, she accepted the position of executive director.

During her tenure, she and her staff more than tripled the budget, helped increase the client base from 150 to 250 women, extended the hours from two to three days a week, fleshed out the post-treatment program to include trips and workshops that allow women who have finished their treatment to remain active in the community, hired a full-time social worker to help clients with basic survival issues like housing and food, instituted the biweekly Latina Day, when the entire staff speaks only Spanish for

the convenience and comfort of monolingual clients, and helped to create an in-home service by enlisting hospice-trained volunteers to visit the terminally ill at their homes. In addition to working seven days a week, Herrick also donated her entire salary toward a pilot program, modeled directly on CMCC, launched at the American College of Chinese Medicine in San Francisco. The program was a success, and plans for opening a permanent second clinic in San Francisco are now under way.

When asked what inspires her commitment to the clinic, Herrick’s voice softens. “When I got my cancer, I had every thing—a husband, friends, money, a home, health insurance—and still I felt like my world had been shattered. These women have nothing. Imagine having kids and no partner and needing to go to work every day. Or being homeless and getting chemo and then being on the street all day. These women need this place.”

A year ago, Herrick went for her annual mammogram; another Stage II, grade 3 invasive tumor was found in the same breast treated 10 years earlier. Again, Herrick opted for a lumpectomy followed by chemo-therapy, but “the first treatment brought me to my knees. After the third, I lost an entire week of memory. I began to worry about brain damage.” She refused any more chemotherapy and instead had a mastectomy. A year later, there is no evi-

dence of disease.

For nine months after her diagnosis and during treatment, Herrick not only continued running the clinic and raising her son, she also started studying to become an acupuncturist herself. The load began to take its toll on her health, and Herrick realized she would have to choose between school and her job. Her decision was heartbreaking, but in February, she stepped down as executive director. She is now enrolled in the Academy of Chinese Culture and Health Sciences in Oakland, and plans one day to work with the CMCC patients as a practitioner herself.

Herrick admits cancer has brought her life full circle in a funny way. “As a little girl, I always carried a first-aid kit, because I wanted to make sure that if one of my friends fell, I could take care of them. In fact, I was originally pre-med, but all the medical school students seemed so unhappy, I went into business instead. It’s always been there, though, this desire to heal. I’ve finally found a model that works for me.”



Connie Herrick with her son, Matt