



A Touching Practice

Autumn Woodward finds power and healing in our most basic senses.

WRITTEN BY EMILY BALLARD | PHOTOS BY ANTHONY HARDEN

A modest building resides off of Orange Street, just past the hustle and bustle of downtown Asheville and the busy Merrimon Avenue corridor. There is history within the walls, and each creaky stair alludes to the fact that this building must have been here long before this area was the destination that it has become today. There is also a calm quiet in the halls, and each step feels as if it is echoing loudly, disturbing the peace in each room.

At the end of the hall, Autumn Woodward emerges and leads clients to her treatment room, speaking in friendly, hushed tones so as not to disturb the other therapists and their clients in the building. A sparse room with a few antique looking chairs and a massage table fill the space, and relaxing spa music

quietly plays in the background. The cloth that covers the table is decorated with penguins and bananas, a clear indication that this is not an ordinary massage studio.

Autumn is the owner of Autumn Woodward - Massage Therapy, a private practice that specializes in pediatric massage. Connotations may lead to preconceptions of frivolity and self-indulgence, but this small business owner is a Certified Pediatric Massage Therapist and a Licensed Massage and Bodywork Practitioner, and has spent 14 years building a practice that guides families to alternative clinical treatments for both emotional and physical pain. Although she recognizes the importance of massage therapy as a means of relaxation, she has devoted her time and efforts to exploring modalities to

AUTUMN WOODWARD



A SIMPLE backrub
can yield physical and
emotional dividends.



offer to children and families experiencing outside stresses or daily difficulties. She finds that sometimes a basic back rub, or the soothing placement of her hands on tense areas, can trigger a profound reaction with her clients, a twinned physical response and emotional release that, in turn, can instill a lasting healing power.

An Organic Beginning

Autumn comes from a big family of four brothers and a sister. She describes them as goofy and playful, and you can sense that they were not lacking in love and support. She fondly recalls family rituals involving her siblings and her father circling around to give each other back scratches as he read them bedtime stories, and jokes that this was probably a clever technique he used to stay awake through story time. This family closeness was instrumental in Autumn's later work and studies. Although she grew up in Western North Carolina, Autumn's mother was from Washington state, and for a period of time, that is where they called home. They lived in a remote area at the end of a 55-mile lake in the Cascade Mountains, a national park not accessible by vehicle.

It was here that she began to cultivate her deep love and understanding of nature and healing as she developed an interest in plants and herbal medicine. "I was homeschooled, so I had a very hands-on education, which led to enjoying things and teaching things that are very literally hands-on, like massage," Autumn remembers.

But it would be one very specific event that would change the course of Autumn's future. On the way back from a group bike trip, the entire family was involved in a car accident after a wolf crossing the road caused them to be rear ended by a vehicle travelling 65 miles per hour. Autumn suffered severe cervical whiplash.

She suddenly found that the things that she enjoyed doing, such as playing the fiddle, or simple acts of movement, were extremely difficult and painful. To treat the damaged area, her doctor prescribed neuromuscular treatment, and she went to see a specialist in this field that practiced massage therapy.

"It helped me because I was not able to do things that I was used to doing. I couldn't put my head back or lift my head, because the muscles were so damaged in the front. I thought, 'Whoa, that's kind of a big deal, that you are able to help me get through this injury'," she recalls with incredulity, even after all these years.

Autumn went through a full year of treatment, but perhaps even more life changing for her was the spark of interest and inspiration she found in the unique world that had opened up to her. She felt drawn to delve deeper into this relatively unknown field of study that had helped her so immensely. Recognizing her strong curiosity, her parents and the herbalist she had been studying with arranged for

her to start an apprenticeship with the same therapist who had helped her heal from her injury.

It proved to be the perfect opportunity for Autumn. Because she was homeschooled, she was able to graduate a semester early. So at the young age of 17, she left home and spent a month taking in everything she possibly could from her mentor's 25 years of experience as a doctor. As she fondly remembers the time, she jokes, "If you want to be a massage therapist, you have to start by folding a lot of laundry." She admits that this occupied much of her routine, but it did not deter her enthusiasm: She now knew that this was the path she wanted to pursue.

Unexpected Discoveries

Following the apprenticeship, Autumn set off on a road trip to seek out a formal program of study, and at the urging of a family friend, she met with the director of the Montana School of Massage in Missoula. She instantly felt that this was a great fit for her ambitions.

"I was 18 when I went to school," she notes, "and I was really passionate about helping people with pain and healing from physical injury. Especially working with people who had whiplash, because I knew what that felt like." Autumn studied traditional massage techniques, but it was really the clinical side of treatment that interested her the most.

She returned to North Carolina, but spent summers travelling back to Montana to work at a massage clinic. And it was a surprising encounter with a client at this clinic that would become the basis for a new path in her massage journey—a child around the age of eight.

Up until that point, massage therapy on children had never crossed Autumn's mind. She remembers spending maybe a day on the subject in school, but at the time, it was still a relatively new concept.

On this particular day in the clinic, Autumn remembers hearing the child stomping down the hall and flopping onto the

couch. His mother disappeared into a room to have her massage treatment with another therapist, and there sat this prickly, angry little boy. Autumn thought there must be a mistake, but after checking the books she found that indeed, this was her

next client. With no information to go on, she hesitantly took him to the treatment room.

Autumn really wasn't sure of the best way to communicate with him and approached him cautiously. He jumped onto the table still wearing his soccer jersey. She asked him how he was feeling, and the boy seemed almost surprised that someone would ask him that question. A few words and a simple back rub ignited a palpable response from the child. And after a moment he opened up to Autumn about feeling sad and unhappy from an incident involving the family cat.

As the session progressed, there were tears—clearly, an emotional liberation for the boy. By the end of their time together, this once-sour tempered youngster was now joking with Autumn. "It was just interesting," she now reflects, "because my initial reaction to him was that I didn't want to go anywhere near him. He looked like he could cut you down, but he was just this very caring, gentle child. That was when I first encountered that idea that massage could help children in *other* ways than physical pain, and that children might be needing it."



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An Emerging Field

Pediatric massage is certainly gaining traction and respect in the mainstream medical community. When Autumn started her studies, there was relatively little information regarding the topic, but today, extensive studies are being conducted on the effects this treatment has on our younger population. Medical journals are publishing in-depth studies, and doctors and hospitals are presenting this as a valuable option for their patients.

The Journal of Pain Symptom Management, The International Journal of Neuroscience, and The Oncology Nursing Forum are just a few that have published articles on



AUTUMN with one of her young clients.



A SESSION also includes listening.

the positive effects of pediatric massage therapy. *The Journal of Applied Gerontology* additionally presented an intriguing study (“Elder Retired Volunteers Benefit from Giving Massage Therapy to Infants”) in which a notable decrease in anxiety, depression, and stress was observed from these interactions, finding a correlation in the action of pediatric massage for both the elderly volunteers and infant patients. Another study, published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (“Massage Therapy Facilitates Weight Gain in Preterm Infants”), found that infant patients who underwent massage therapy gained 28-41% more weight than patients receiving no massage, a crucial period of growth in children.

Worth noting: As more evidence gets presented, and the general public continues to evolve in its acceptance of a real connection between massage and cognitive benefits for both adults and children, there is hope for more complete insurance coverage—which is often non-existent at this point—for such procedures.

Here in Western North Carolina, Mission Hospital now has a certified pediatric massage therapist on staff, and they have found positive results in this treatment. In a recent publication from Mission called *My Healthy Life*, pediatric oncologist and hematologist Dr. Krystal Bottom said, “In pediatric cancer patients, massage helps relieve pain and discomfort. In kids undergoing chemotherapy, massage can also help relieve nausea from medications.” St. Joseph’s Healthcare System in New Jersey utilizes similar integrative therapy techniques for children, and has had a great response to massage therapy, as well as acupuncture and reflexology.

This growth and recognition is the exciting part of Autumn’s practice. She has now spent years exploring the effects that

touch can have on individuals, and as she explains, "Touch is really fascinating and powerful in terms of immediate physiological response—even touch that is not 'taught'."

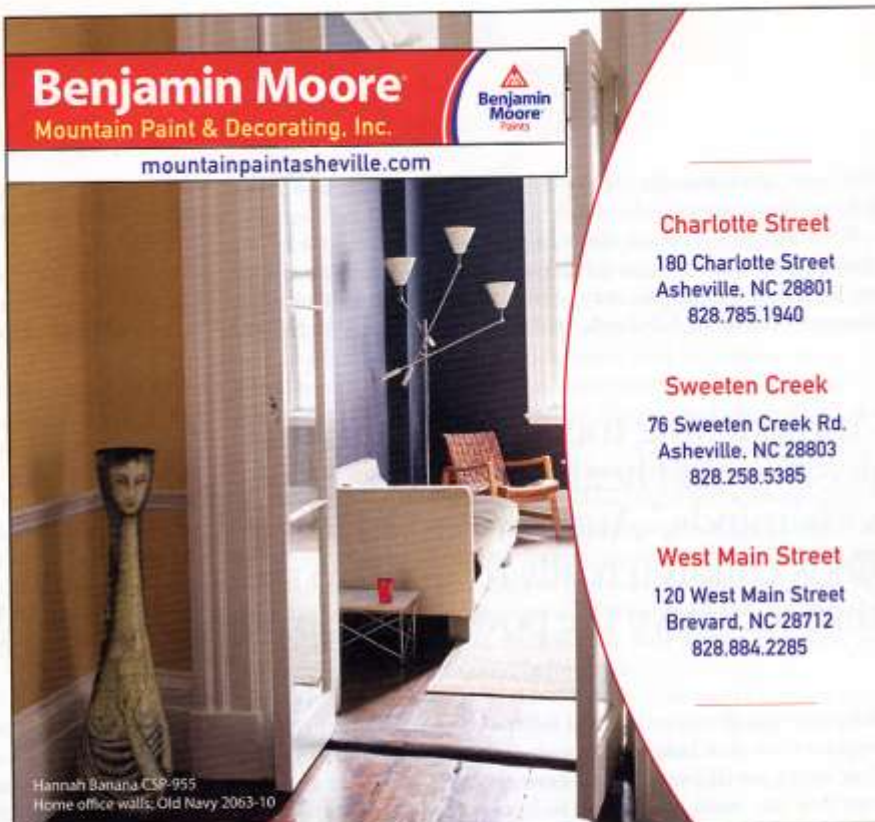
She continues, noting that when families are experiencing the traumatic experience of hospitalization, massage can have a profound effect. "That's what I like to share with parents, because if they have a child in the hospital, just approaching massage can be so simple; they don't have to be a master of technique. It can just be a hold, and that act of doing their best can calm down and focus their loving attention with the child."

In her practice, she makes sure to also focus on providing information and techniques for the family that extend beyond their sessions. "Giving and receiving massage in a family has positive physiological benefits for both giver and receiver, and also gives a sense of closeness and deep bonding," she says. Related to this is something she expounds upon, the theory that as technology advances, and children and adults grow attached to hand held devices and phones, a greater divide is wedged between individuals and the very basic act of touch. "With greater technological capacity than we've ever experienced, there has also been an impoverishment of our connectedness to one another. Eyes flick to phone screens, we answer one another distractedly, and work to save time, only to forget what we were saving it for."

Autumn believes the practice and techniques of pediatric massage can ease this disparity and have a profound effect on both emotional and physical behavior.

Building a Business

Starting a small business—here, a sole proprietorship—obviously has its advantages and disadvantages, and Autumn has been on the receiving end of both. "As an entrepreneur, I face a lot of the similar challenges that other small business owners do," she says. "I think that one of the biggest steps for me was overcoming this feeling that I should just know business and should be able to do



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that part, even though I trained for years to be able to do what I do on the practice side of it.”

With any new venture there is a learning curve, and luckily Autumn has found great resources within the community to help her along the way. She stumbled upon the small business center at A-B Tech, and has also worked with SCORE

she says. “We are lucky to live in a town that has so many good healing professionals that it could be really competitive, and of course it is to some degree. But there is a very supportive feeling among people practicing.” This comes in the form of referrals, collaborations, shared goals, and groups that flesh out the challenges and the accessibility of the industry.

Over time, Autumn has also experimented with different business approaches and ways of client care. In such a specialized practice, her success has come from trial and error, and a desire to deepen her understanding as well as educate the community. When she first started her practice, she implemented a structured process to her sessions, but quickly found that each patient reacted and evolved differently. In some cases, a certain technique can ease the pain of whiplash, but treatment for emotional and behavioral maladies may not be as measurable.

“Approaching touch as something that is positive and healing is like watering a seed in kids’ minds,” Autumn says, adding that she finds children really respond to the realization that they have the power to help others.

(formerly the Service Corps of Retired Executives), a nonprofit organization that helps local businesses to grow. She has found that other small business owners are quick to offer support, and this has been invaluable to her. “I have been surprised,”

Teaching has been an important part of Autumn’s career. She directed the Haywood Community College’s therapeutic massage program from 2008-2010, strengthening her leadership and clinical supervision experience. Today, she



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enjoys leading classes for the younger generation, such as a recent one for the Rainbow Community School. In these classes she is able to work directly with students to demonstrate simple techniques that can act as support for peers. She hopes these can be used to abate the overwhelming daily pressures that children are faced with, and in some cases bullying behaviors, grief, and anxiety.

"Asking permission and making sure it feels okay is a way that they can help their friends when they are struggling. Approaching touch as something that is positive and healing is like watering a seed in kids' minds," Autumn says, adding that she finds children really respond to the realization that they have the power to help others. Beyond that is the simple recognition that daily societal demands can be extreme for many young kids. "I hold an intention for the child to have the experience of coming home to warmth, freedom, and a wholeness beyond the pressures and demands of school or social life."

Moving Forward

In addition to her current practice and her ongoing classes, Autumn has plans for expanding into an additional ground floor space so that she can work with children with limiting physical

conditions such as cerebral palsy (CP). When she was receiving her certification in pediatric massage, she found particular interest in a seminar she took on massage therapy for CP. Her new endeavor hopes to address the muscle contracture from neurological effects of the disease. Massage can release tension and increase circulation to help with the physical conditions, and it additionally can provide relief and relaxation from the emotional stress the patient is experiencing. The new space is only a few doors down on Orange Street, and she will be able to practice in both locations.

Autumn is well travelled and has spent time learning the art of presence (a spiritual technique used for achieving inner peace) from nuns in France; inspiring comedic reactions with clown therapy in Peru with famed physician Patch Adams; and studying massage techniques in India. In talking about her patients and her experiences, she visibly lights up, because the three elements that root her as well as her business are *presence, connection, and belonging.*

"I think it is easy to overlook things that aren't hi-tech fixes to a problem, or that are right in front of our nose," she says, urging people to remember, "we have hands."

Those two very basic appendages hold a powerful source of kinship, commonality, and healing. ©

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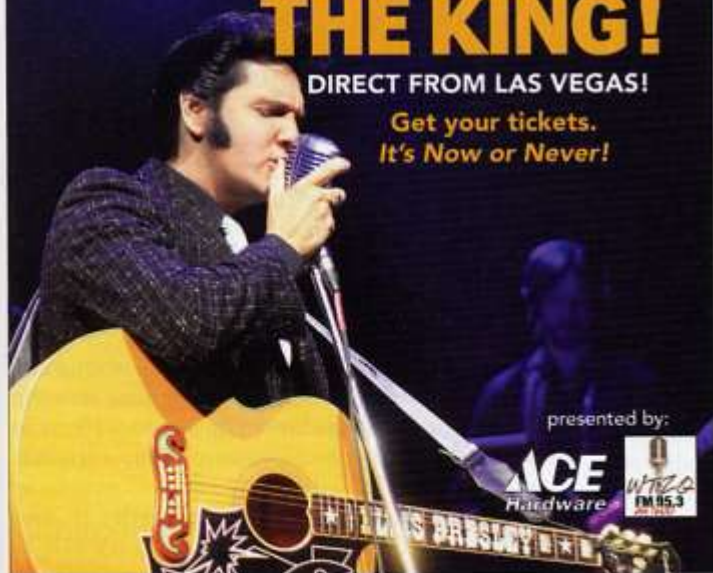
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