

Alternate Routes

Born To Heal

A Modern Woman Practices an Ancient Art

This is one in a series of articles on the variety of paths many are taking to achieve physical, emotional and spiritual health.

BY GEARY DANIHY
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Some people are born to be great artists, others to build financial empires or lead vast armies, and some are born to heal.

Gigi Benanti owns the Angelic Healing Touch Center on Morgan Avenue and specializes in Reiki healing. The term is loosely translated as "universal life force energy" and refers to an ancient Tibetan healing method that was "rediscovered" in the late 1890s by Mikao Usui, a Japanese educator.

Benanti, a dark-haired, soft-spoken woman, began "healing" long before she understood what she was really doing.

"I had done some healing work as a child," she said. "I would put my hands on someone when they had a headache or a stomach ache, and I'd feel the energy kind of shifting and going away from their bodies. But no one paid much attention to it. I was 6, 7 years old, and they probably thought it was a little weird."

Over the years she was urged by relatives and friends to pursue her perceived gift, but she really didn't see herself fitting into what she thought of as the alternative lifestyle of the "healer."

"It was just a little bit over the edge," she said, "so I just kind of did it on my own and saw auras and did this healing thing up until the 1990s, when I took a class at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, N.Y." The institute is a healing center that



also offers courses, workshops and retreats on New Age topics.

Oddly enough, the course she took at Omega was on children's book writing, but the instructor was having what Benanti called "an emotional issue going on." One day "I started doing this little bit of healing over his heart chakra," she said, referring to one of the seven wheel-like energy centers that are supposedly located along the spinal column and are central to the Hindu discipline of yoga.

"I really didn't know what I was doing," she said, "except that he told me he felt better." Her instructor encouraged her to get some training, especially in meditation. This she did in a Wilton continuing education class, and the teacher there urged her to look into Reiki.

"I have a cat named Dusty who had terrible arthritis," Benanti said, "and I wanted to help her, but I was afraid to do the healing because at that time I still hadn't had the training." She spoke to her meditation instructor, and he continued to encourage her. What clinched it was the confluence of a flier for a \$175 Reiki class and a \$175 bill from Dusty's last visit to the veterinarian.

"Synergy was telling me go do this," Benanti said. She took the one-day course and it changed her life. It also taught her not to channel healing energy through her body.

"Before the class, doing the healing used to make my hands hurt," she said. "I think it was because I was healing from my own energy, from my body, and I didn't know what to do. No one else was hurt — they felt great, their pain was relieved."

The class taught her how to channel the energy. "When I put my hands on someone, it felt very comfortable. It felt different. The energy just shifted and went right through me. I felt no pain in my hands."

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NORWALK CITIZEN NEWS photo / Cathy Zuraw
At the Angelic Healing Touch Center, Reiki master Gigi Benanti's goal is to help relieve clients' pain and stress.

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She understands how valuable that lesson was. "You get burned out. You can't keep doing it. You're not well. I'm really glad I found my way to a class."

She did Reiki healing work on her cat, her first client, around 1995, and the cat seems to have benefited from it. "Occasionally she has pain," Benanti said, "but that's normally the day before it snows or something, and she looks at me like I should give her Reiki, because she knows the difference between petting and the healing energy. And that was my start."

Prior to her Reiki training, Benanti had gotten her license to perform electrolysis, a permanent method of hair removal. She started doing healing work on the women who came to her for electrolysis, and slowly the hair removal became a thing of the past.

"When I started to do a little healing on them," she said, "I'd usually get to where their pain was without them telling me, and then I realized that my intuitive abilities were opening up."

Now she is a Reiki master, having taken numerous courses and refined her skills, and people come to her Downstate healing center for a variety of reasons. "Reiki's not a specific healing treatment," she said, "it's really a session, like a relaxation session. Usually they'll say to me that they have a stomachache or a headache or that they have stress, so I'll say a prayer calling in the energy from the angels and the highest intention of all concerned."

With her client lying on a treatment table in a narrow room with whitewashed walls, "celestial" music playing in the background, she will place her hands on different parts of the client's body.

"It's like the weight of a nickel," she said, "and they'll either feel warm hands from me or cold hands if they have, say, an inflammation in their body. Even though

my hands will feel hot to me, they will feel cold."

One woman came to her because she was having problems with her knees. "I felt like someone had poured ice water on my hands," Benanti said, "and I opened my eyes and looked at my hands, and they were blue from the cold, which was OK, and I said to her, 'How do you feel best?' and she said, 'Well, I put ice on my knees,' and I said, 'Well, that's what you have now. Somebody knows you feel best with cold hands.'"

Describing what she feels when she is doing a Reiki session is difficult. "Every receiver is different, so I feel a little differently each time, but if the person really wants it, I will feel energy going through my body and coming through my hands. It feels like heat vibration moving out. And sometimes I might feel that there are angels around us or, I don't know, spirit guides if you want to call them that. They say it's done within the white light, so it's not witching. It's definitely angelic healing."

Some of Benanti's clients might have visions, a connection, Benanti believes, with something from their past. Other clients, she said, find that a session allows them to more easily deal with problems with which they have been wrestling.

Benanti also teaches continuing education classes, most recently one on angel auras and intuition. The course, she said, was designed to help people connect with their angels. "Of course, a lot of this you can't prove, but it's fun and it's harmless. We do energy work and then meditation, and then I help them see their auras," she said, referring to the supposed physical manifestations of electric fields surrounding living things.

Benanti also claims to do distance healing, which is taught in the higher degrees of Reiki training. "I can volunteer my time and

send people distant healing energy, and they don't have to be with me," she said. "We did a lot of distant healing on my godson, who was born with a lot of birth defects."

She does healing circles with her practitioners, those to whom she has taught Reiki, and as a group they sent distant healing energy to her godson while he was in the hospital. "The boy's mother said that every time that we would send it, she would see the machines positively changing," Benanti said, "so there was proof that there was energy being received."

Benanti doesn't try to attach herself to the outcome of a session. She doesn't really feel that she is the one doing the healing, rather that she's merely channeling the healing energy from higher sources. "I find I do better with the healing in that way," she said. "If I can let it go, I can do more of it because I won't burn out physically or emotionally."

Healing energy

Reiki backers cite a sense of balance

By James O'Keefe • Kerry Schreck

Staff Writer

Staff photos



Above, Reiki master Gigi Benanti rings Tibetan cymbals over Reiki practitioner Janella Lawrence at the end of her healing session. Below, Benanti holds her hands above Mason's head during a session. At left is Lawrence. The Japanese characters in the background translate as Reiki, or 'universal life force energy.'

NORWALK — The pungent scent of lavender and other essential oils wafted through the dimly lit, white-washed basement room of the Angelic Healing Touch Center.

New Age music played softly in the background as a woman stretched out on a cushioned table. Her eyes were covered with a small cushion and a blanket embroidered with angels was pulled over her body.

Two women and a man surrounded the table. One of them held the woman's head while the others touched their hands to her body.

They were practicing Reiki (pronounced Ray-key) — an ancient Tibetan and Japanese method of light-touch healing believed to balance the body, mind and spirit. The procedure sometimes is used to complement medical treatment. Those who practice it say it has been successful in reducing pain and accelerating recovery.

Among those participating in the healing circle was Reiki master Gigi Benanti, who operates the healing touch center on the ground floor of her home on Morgan Avenue.

Benanti, an electrologist by trade, has been practicing Reiki for about five years. She took up the practice initially to provide pain relief to her cat.

"My cat had terrible pain and terrible arthritis. I wanted to do some healing work on her and was told that Reiki would be helpful," said Benanti, 42.

Benanti began studying Reiki — made up of two Japanese words meaning "God's wisdom or the higher power" and "life force energy" — and loved it.

Healers channel the energy from Reiki and allow it to flow from their hands into the receiver. The healer and the receiver feel energized after a session.

"It was really for me," Benanti said of Reiki. "I started wanting to do healing energy on people."

Benanti earned her Reiki Master certificate and opened the healing center.

She now teaches courses in Reiki and performs the healing touch technique on clients seeking relief from stress or a serious illness, such as cancer.

"People come to me with terrible stress, emotional discomfort or depression, heart ailments," Benanti explained. "Sometimes they're not really sure what it is, but there is something that is making their lives miserable."

Some use Reiki as a complement to medical treatment. Benanti said she has been called upon to perform Reiki in the intensive care and neonatal units of hospitals.

Reiki student Patricia Mason said she regularly used Reiki on a friend who underwent a hysterectomy.

"It helped her prepare for surgery and calmed her down. She had a lot quicker recovery," said Mason, a Bridgeport resident who has been studying Reiki with Benanti.

Essential oils, such as wintergreen, purification and

joy, are often used to heighten the Reiki experience. The various all-natural oils can be used to calm nerves, combat digestive problems and soothe insect bites.

Reiki has been featured in The New York Times, USA Today and numerous magazines and appears to be gaining acceptability, Benanti said. A group of local nuns also regularly practice and teach Reiki as a form of focused prayer, she added.

"There is some skepticism (about

Reiki) but not as much as there used to be," Benanti said. "Some people may think it's too weird, but others say, 'If it helps me, it can't hurt.'"

Benanti said Reiki can be fulfilling.

It is gratifying when students embrace Reiki and are motivated to continue their studies and when someone in pain experiences relief, she said.

— For more information, contact the Angelic Healing Touch Center by phone at 852-1150 or access its Web site at <http://angelic-healing-touch.Ome.com>.



The HEALING TOUCH

Reiki advocates credit Buddhist tradition in healing patients without medicine

By LISA DAVIS
Hour Staff Writer

NORWALK — People who have literally been touched by the power of Reiki (pronounced ray-key) energy healing are advocating that the ancient Buddhist tradition be formally offered at Norwalk Hospital.

Norwalk Hospital allows a nurse or doctor certified in Reiki to offer it to their patients at the hospital, based on permission from both the doctor and the patient but no formal program is offered. Reiki therapy is used most often by cancer patients to help them through chemotherapy treatments.

Several other hospitals in lower Fairfield County, including Greenwich Hospital, Stamford Hospital, St. Joseph Medical Center, Bridgeport Hospital and St. Vincent's Medical Center, also don't formally offer Reiki but would allow a nurse

or doctor to practice it at the patient's request.

Reiki certified master Gigi Benanti, and Reiki certified practitioner of Norwalk say the treatment has helped many of their clients who suffer from cancer, stress and other physical ailments.

"Reiki enhances the healing process and boosts a person's immune system to help them heal from an illness," said Benanti, who owns Angelic Healing Touch Center on Morgan Avenue.

"Reiki is a valuable service," said who practices the technique for free on some of her patients. Benanti is an oncology nurse.

"Reiki can do no harm," she said. "As far as safety is a concern there is no safety issue. Reiki is a wonderful thing for patients."

Norwalk Hospital is looking to develop a

more comprehensive pastoral care program that will offer spiritual support for patients,

Reiki, an ancient Buddhist practice, is part of several alternative medicine practices being introduced into comprehensive health care. Other practices include therapeutic touch and massage.

A practitioner places their hands on a client and holds them there for roughly five minutes. The theory is that universal life energy transfers from the practitioner's hands to the client, relieving stress and pain.

There are 15 different hand positions, including over the eyes, on the neck and on the back of the head. Each position would help heal a certain disorder.

Norwalk resident Madeline Herman credits Reiki in healing a gastrointestinal infection.



Gigi Benanti moves along a client's body to disperse positive energy. "I'm only the conduit for universal life force energy. I help people heal themselves," she said.

Hour photos/Steve Zavotki

"You could say I am almost cured," Herman said. "The pain I had I don't have anymore. I am much better physically. Reiki has given me energy. It has relaxed me. Reiki helps you harness all your energies in your body to work for you."

Reiki also helps ease emotional problems, particularly stress.

Last year, Berta Perez suffered from depression. She has since sought Reiki healing and said her bouts with sadness and anxiety are over.

"It has changed my whole life," said Perez, who is now a certified Reiki practitioner in Darien. "I am happy with myself whereas before I was angry over physical abuse from my childhood."

Perez practices Reiki on her two children. "They used to suffer from chronic ear infections before but since I started Reiki they have not had one ear infection and have not needed any antibiotics."



Angelic Reiki Blessings, Gigi

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By appointment only--no drop-ins