

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

VITALISTIC HEALING

through chiropractic care

About the author

Barbara Ravage moved to Cape Cod from her native New York City in 2000, after the youngest of her children went off to college. She considers heavy doses of ocean air and Cape light the best cure for empty nest syndrome.

A graduate of Barnard College, she is the author of nine books, including a biography of Rachel Carson for middle-school students and "Burn Unit: Saving Lives After the Flames," which explores the history and science of burn treatment.

She balances her writing life with yoga, karate, and pottery. After years of making do with two summer weeks on the Cape, her favorite part about living here is that she's already home.



MERRILY LUNSFORD/CAPE COD TIMES

Chiropractor Paula Sperry adjusts Marty Cepkauskas of Eastham during an office visit. Paula became a chiropractor to fulfill her desire to practice medicine in accordance with her belief that helping people stay well can ward off some health conditions that can lead to crises.

BY BARBARA RAVAGE

If you've ever driven through Eastham on Route 6, you've probably noticed the banners. The colorful flags change daily, sometimes signaling a holiday or boosting the Sox or the Pats, often just waving cheerfully in the breeze beneath the sign that reads: Chiropractor.

The chiropractor in question is Paula Sperry an ebullient woman with a booming laugh and a solid commitment to the healing arts. Now 53, Paula says she knew growing up that she wanted to be either a teacher or a doctor. It would be years before she ever heard the word chiropractor, but she had a notion about the kind of doctor she wanted to be. "My dream was to help people get and stay healthy and to avoid sickness and injury. That's what I felt a doctor was."

She put herself through college, majoring in pre-med at the State University of New York's Fredonia campus, near her hometown of Buffalo. But along the way, she realized that medicine as practiced in the United States essentially means working with patients in crisis: "A lot of unhappy people who are having a bad day," she says. "I wanted to work with healthy people who wanted to get and stay more healthy."

Paula describes herself as a vitalist, one who believes, according to "Mosby's Dictionary of Complementary and Alternative Medicine," that there is a nonphysical energy that permeates all living organisms. It is akin to the ayurvedic concept of prana, or life force; and qi, the vital energy that according to Chinese traditional medicine must be in proper balance to maintain health. "I couldn't find that anywhere in Western medicine. Nor could I find anything that really cured anything. So that really bothered me," she recalls of her pre-med years.

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Healing

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Discouraged in her quest for a vitalistic healing art, she decided to be an environmental vitalist. While she was still in college, she began working for Lake Erie Environmental Studies as a research scientist and scuba diver. "We studied lakes and ponds, trying to figure out how far gone they were, what we needed to do to bring them back."

It was that job that brought her to the Cape. "We wanted to investigate the ocean environment because we were so stuck on fresh water," she recalls of the junket she took three decades ago. "There were two carloads of people. One car went to Brewster and the other went to Provincetown. I happened to be in the car going to Provincetown." The magic of the place grabbed her, and it has never let her go. She went back to Fredonia, got her bachelor of science degree, and worked briefly out West, but the Cape called her back. "I figured I'd tend bar and waitress in Provincetown, and I basically worked my way up one side of the street and down the other, like everybody else."

That was in the late 1970s. One day she injured her shoulder while working out at the Provincetown Gym. When it didn't get better after a week or so, she went to a doctor recommended by a friend. Before she knew what was happening, the doctor took her head in his hands, gave it a jerk, and the pain was gone. "Whoa! What kind of doctor is that?" Paula remembers thinking. It turns out he was a chiropractor.

She started investigating chiropractic, "And sure enough I found everything I had been looking for: a way for people to improve their lifestyle, to get and stay incredibly healthy so it would be much harder to get sick, much harder to injure themselves." She enrolled in Life Chiropractic College, in Georgia, the pre-emi-

nent institution in the field. After receiving her doctor of chiropractic degree in 1986, she returned to the Cape. She divided her time between her private practice in Wellfleet and seeing patients two days a week at Healing Hands in Provincetown.

In 1993, she bought the big white house on Route 6 in Eastham from Dr. Hamilton, a beloved old-timer who had been practicing osteopathic medicine for years. Her office occupies the first floor, while she lives upstairs with her partner, Kathy, who cares for profoundly developmentally challenged adults at the May Institute in Marstons Mills. "God's work," Paula calls it.

But what exactly do chiropractors do? According to Paula, the central principle is "to find, detect, and remove nerve interference." She emphasizes that chiropractic is not limited to relief of pain, in the back or any other part of the body. Instead, she says, chiropractors should be regarded as holistic neurologists.

Regardless of what brings someone to her

office, Paula begins with a thorough neurological evaluation, including the spinal nerves, the spinal cord, and the bony covering. Her office is equipped to do full-spine X-rays: "I can find out so much that way. If I did just separate lumbar, thoracic, and neck X-rays," she explains, "I wouldn't be able to tell how patients are in relation to themselves."

The goal is to locate the nerve interference. "Once we locate and detect it, we remove it, and that's it. We do that by giving the person a few to a series of chiropractic adjustments, depending upon what their particular situation needs."

This can be done through a variety of modalities, often in combination, always with the individual's needs and preferences in mind. "People assume that all we do is the racky-cracky type thing, but there are many low-force techniques," she says,

I wanted to work with healthy people who wanted to get and stay more healthy.

PAULA SPERRY, D.C.
SPERRY CHIROPRACTIC,
EASTHAM

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that involve no more pressure than the light touch of her hand. "It gets results."

In keeping with her preference to help people get and stay healthy, rather than limiting herself and her patients to short-term crisis intervention, Paula focuses on what she calls corrective care, with periodic tune-ups. It takes longer, but the result is a more active, fit, and healthy life. "I think that people are looking for a quality-of-life healing art. I think people would prefer not to get sick at all, not to have pain." She sees this especially as people enter midlife and begin to feel the effects of aging. "To me, aging is a pathological process. It's not what people think: You're just getting old and that's it." Her approach is to find out "where the nervous system is getting choked off, not allowing the expression of life, and where the part that's connected to this shutdown might be slowly decaying and deteriorating."

She likens the nervous system to an orchestra playing harmoniously. "If the conductor doesn't show up and all the musicians are left to play whatever they want, it's just chaos everywhere. When the conductor's there, it makes beautiful music, it's the song of life, the harmony is restored. When nerve interference is removed from the entire spinal system, and everything is fine-tuned, the body is back in balance and that music can happen again." That is the essence of vitalistic practice. Working with patients this way "takes a little more education, but remember, I said I wanted to be a teacher. This way I get to do both," she says, beaming.

The teaching goes beyond chiropractic. Paula's voice is familiar to listeners of WOMR as host of the Tuesday morning program, "Talking Back." Her aim, she says, is "to help introduce the Cape Cod

Quickhits

Holistic neurology

Sperry Chiropractic
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community to alternative healing techniques. There are wonderful massage, Pilates, and yoga specialists, nutritionists, chiropractors and acupuncturists, tong ren healers, and more." The half-hour show is devoted

to interviews with local practitioners and discussion of alternative health and green issues. She sees it as part of her role in the community.

"I'm really very grateful to be part of the community of the Cape. It's one of the most beautiful and interesting places on Earth. We have so much freedom here to do what we want to do, be who we want to be, and carry out whatever our dreams

are.

"You can't experience this beauty and freedom if you're not adapting well to your environment, which by definition you do through your nervous system. What a wonderful opportunity I have to help people adapt, through their nervous system and their neurology, so they are able to experience how really beautiful it is."

... Paula focuses on what she calls corrective care, with periodic tune-ups. It takes longer, but the result is a more active, fit, and healthy life.

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