

Photography by Rick Chitt

Touch for Homeless Clients

San Francisco's Care Through Touch Institute

BY REBECCA JONES

Mary Ann Finch touches the untouchable every day. This onetime seminary professor-turned-massage therapist brings the healing touch of massage to a population most people shun. Her clients are sometimes dirty, sometimes inebriated, and sometimes violent. They are nearly always homeless, inhabiting the dangerous and squalid back alleys of San Francisco's Tenderloin district.

Yet these are the very people to whom Finch feels God has called her, and the people who she's training other massage therapists to reach out to through the Care Through Touch Institute (CT), which she founded 25 years ago. They are the people who feed her own soul, even as she nurtures them.

"When you touch another—whether a person or plant or animal—you make a connection, and they make a connection with you," says Finch, 67. "There's an invisible thread of energy that goes back and forth. Who knows who is giving and who is receiving?"

In the past year, Finch, plus her crew of five interns, one paid CT staffer, and a handful of volunteers provided more than 4,300 foot, neck, and shoulder massages to San Francisco's homeless. And by all accounts, they touched at least that many hearts as well.

"Many, many of these people have histories of trauma and violence, and they need to be touched," says Dr. Barry Zevin, medical director of the Tom Waddell Health Center, San Francisco's largest provider of healthcare for the homeless. "But the opportunities for that to occur in a nonthreatening, nonviolent, nonexploitive way are extremely limited. At the most superficial level, massage brings a sense of relaxation, a sense of feeling cared for that is very apparent and very real.

"At a deeper level, it can really change how someone views the world. For people whose only contact with other humans has been violent or exploitive, having physical contact that is meant to be kind and therapeutic can have a real effect on their levels of trust. And once that trust is there, it can be expanded in all kinds of different ways," Zevin explains.

Sonny Lovell, who spent a number of years living on the streets of San Francisco before finally pulling herself out of homelessness and drug addiction, is more direct. "Mary Ann put her hands on me," she says, "and it changed my life."

A TRADITION OF GIVING

Finch's journey has taken her from Berkeley, California, to leper colonies across India, to the streets of Calcutta, to the desperation of the Tenderloin. But it all began with her father, Joseph Finch, a fireman with a great heart for the poor.

"He was a big man. I saw him as somebody who could carry the whole world in his hands," Finch says. "He would do anything people needed done. If they needed coal hauled to their basements in winter, he'd go out in his truck and get some coal. If they needed screens put in in summer, he'd be right there. If they needed their garbage collected, he was there. No big deal. He had a truck, so he could do anything."

The family never had much in the way of material goods, but Finch now sees that as a blessing. "We lived simply. So I've never been afraid of that," she says. "People are afraid of the homeless because it brings up a lot of their own stuff: what would I be like if that were me? But in my case, being poor was not something frightening because I've never been anything but poor."

Also shaping Finch's worldview was her Catholic upbringing. "My faith played a big part in making me aware of the need to really address the injustices in society," she says. "My tradition—and not just the Catholic tradition, but all spiritual traditions that have been a part of my life—espouses that you must not only be aware of these injustices, you must address them."

That faith that took her to Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley to pursue a master's degree in theology and spirituality. She later became

an adjunct professor of Christian spirituality. She became interested in movement therapy and began studying massage as a means to tap into a more embodied experience of the holy.

With a colleague, she founded the nonprofit Center for Growth and Wholeness to teach courses in holistic spirituality. "We started teaching how to evoke and connect to the spiritual dimension of self through the body. One of the ways we did that was through massage," she says.

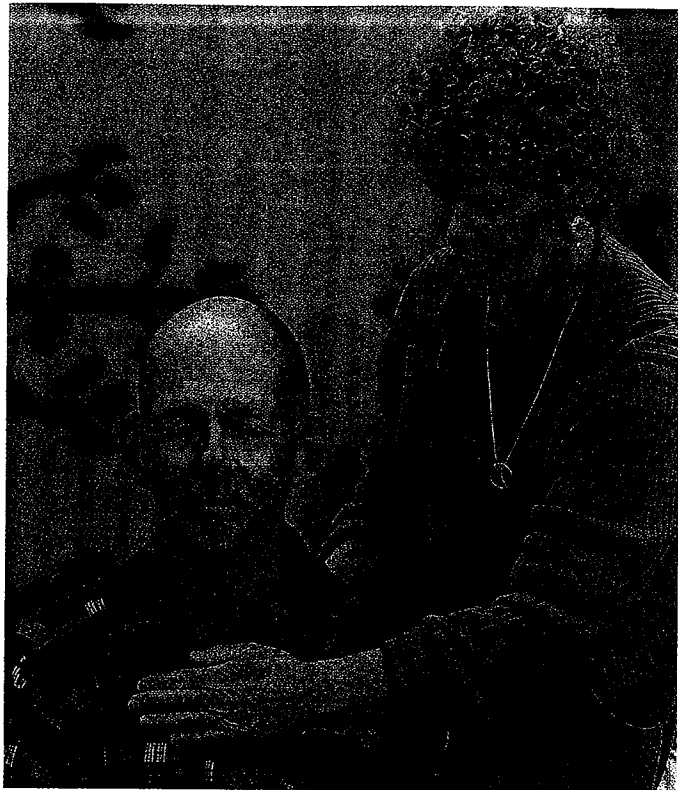
Over time, the massage component of the center became more and more popular. They launched the Care Through Touch Institute in 1989 to give a more thorough grounding in proper massage techniques. "We started with a 100-hour program, then went to 200, then 400, then 500 hours. We became a school that prepared people for their boards," she says.

As the massage school became more successful, Finch felt herself losing focus. She had intended to train counselors and other outreach professionals in ways to incorporate massage into their practices. Instead, she was training people to become professional massage therapists and open their own businesses. "That was never what I had in mind when I became a massage therapist," she says. "That never matched my vision or my mission."

TO INDIA

In 1990, she decided to take a sabbatical and rethink her life's mission. She wanted to find people who needed massage more urgently than the people she was encountering in Berkeley. "We were already working with people with HIV, and those in recovery, but something in me said, 'There's more. Go where you haven't gone before.'"

So she went to India.



“My faith played a big part in making me aware of the need to really address the injustices in society.”

Mary Ann Finch, founder,
Care Through Touch Institute



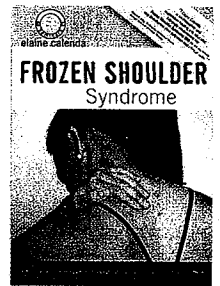
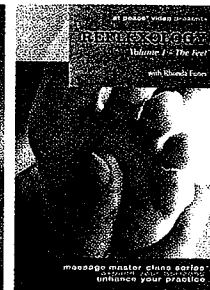
LEARN the skills LOVE the savings

View
video clips
online for
these DVDs
and more
titles

@ AT PEACE[®]
MEDIA

*Get a music
CD free
with any
DVD
purchase

Available
soon
Forearm Dance
2



New



SAVE \$5 on
purchase of two
DVDs or save
\$10 on purchase
of three or more
DVDs from
atpeacevideo.com
CALL
800-575-7715
Offer good through
October 15, 2008*

FREE

shipping on telephone orders*

*US Domestic orders - Lower 48 states - telephone orders only

www.atpeacevideo.com

"I had met someone who knew of a leper colony in the southern part of India," she says. "I wrote to them, told them why I wanted to come. And they wrote back and said, 'Fine, we'd be happy to have you.' So with just that one contact, I headed off for India and trusted that the one contact would lead me wherever I needed to be led."

She recalls with clarity her first evening in the leper colony. She walked into a circle of people with patches over their eyes and bandages over their limbs.

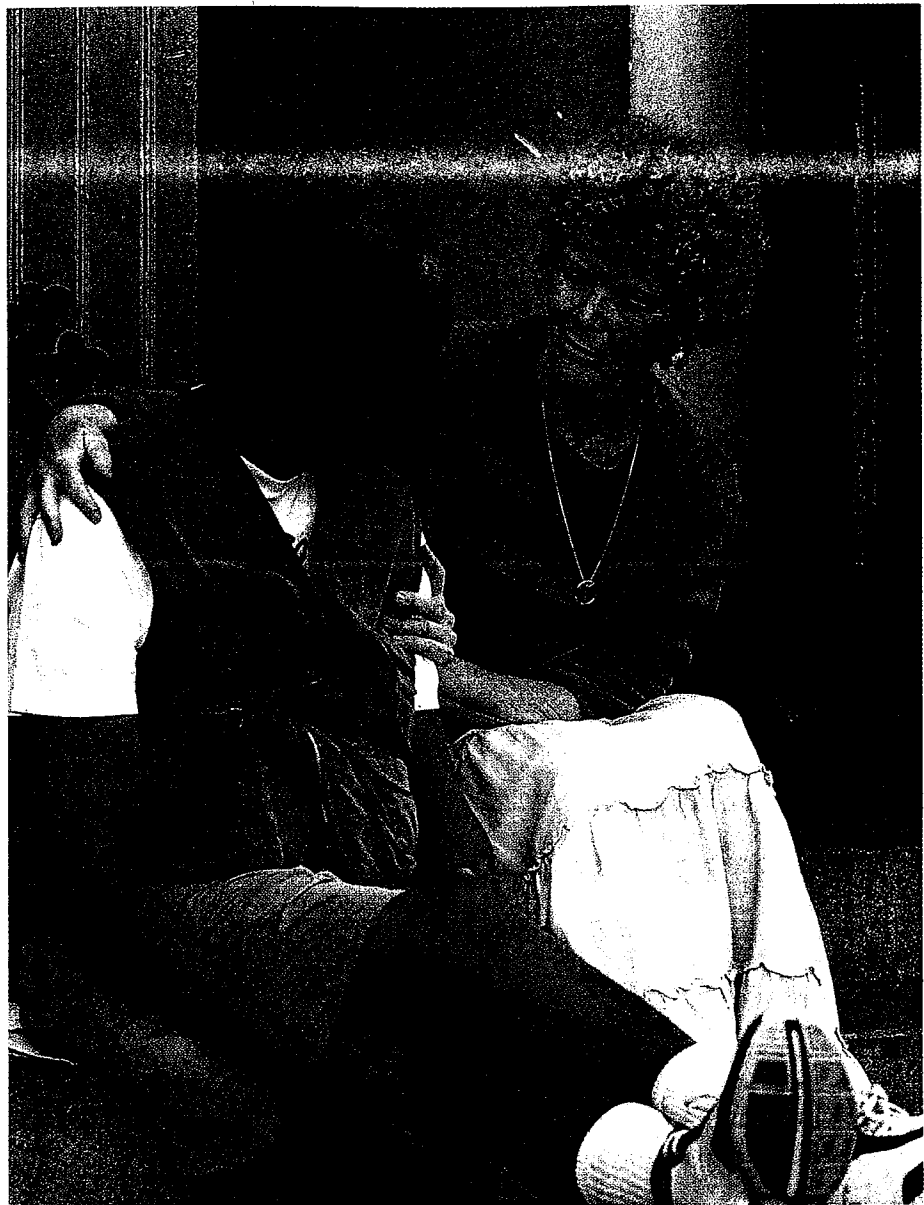
"I just froze," she says. "It was an indescribable feeling of helplessness."

And then the director said to the residents, "Let's welcome Mary Ann." And they began to sing to her.

"I can still hear them," she says. "The sound of their voices eradicated the physical horror in their bodies. Their voices were so clear and their eyes just sparkled. When they finished, they all thrust their hands out to me. For a second, I hesitated. And then I reached back. It was like reaching over the greatest chasm you can imagine, but I made that connection. From that moment on, they became the teachers for what I was to do for the rest of my life."

Finch spent two weeks at the colony, giving massages to people who were not used to receiving much in the way of physical contact. Her touch was slow and gentle, and the lepers fell in love with it. "I'd start at 9 in the morning and wouldn't stop until 5 in the afternoon. By the end of the day, there would still be lines of people waiting."

Finch's path led to the homes run by Mother Teresa. "I worked in all her homes," she says. "The home for the dying, the home for the demented, the home for people with AIDS, the home for abandoned children, the home for the elderly. These homes are sprinkled throughout Calcutta. But



the place that had the deepest effect on me was the home for the dying."

Her first day there, she was told by a nun who oversaw the volunteers to "tend to the man in the room around the corner." Finch went to the specified room and gasped. "I thought, this is what our homeless

shelters are like: rooms with cots filled with people who are groaning and moaning because of the pain and the hunger, hoping there is a blanket."

When she found the man she was supposed to tend, he was already dead. She watched while other volunteers came and unwrapped the blanket



Ambassadors of Touch

Today, CT offers a number of programs, including training in seated massage therapy, on-site massage therapy at various locations around San Francisco, an outreach and advocacy program, a community enrichment and leadership program, a wellness education project, and life coaching.

Pamela Magers, 59, took Finch's intensive training program in 2004. Today, she's on staff at CT, supervising the intern program. An Episcopal nun and former professor of anthropology with an abiding interest in reiki and healthcare, she saw a CT brochure and knew instantly that it was what she wanted to do.

But it hasn't been easy.

"Before you even call and say 'I want to learn more,' something has to touch your heart. It has to do with compassion, a feeling that you want to do something that will help this particular population," Magers says. She had the heart, but she had to overcome her fear. "Can I deal with working with someone who is not entirely clean? In actuality, I've found that most people who sign up for massage are amazingly clean. But the first time I worked with someone with dirty, sweaty clothes, I had to overcome my own fastidiousness."

She recalls with gratitude many of the encounters she's had with homeless people who've come to her as clients. "I remember one time a woman burst into tears in the middle of the massage and said, 'I'm okay. It's just that no one has touched me with respect in so many years!'"

YOUR TOOLS OF THE TRADE

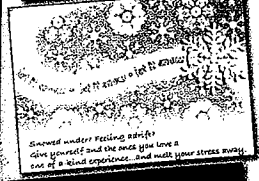
Holiday Gift Certificates

The holiday season is the most natural time to introduce your services to new clients.

Make your first impression reflect your personality and professionalism with any of our dozens of holiday designs.

All gift certificates include matching envelopes, gold seals, and record-keeping stubs.

FREE SAMPLES!



Holiday Greetings & Promotional Postcards

Postcards are a great way to reach out during the busy season without straining your budget.

See our website for coordinated greeting cards and full online catalog.

Bestseller of '07



WE CAN ADD YOUR PERSONAL MESSAGE!



20th Anniversary!

NATURAL TOUCH MARKETING™
FOR THE HEALING ARTS
call 1-800-754-9790 or visit www.NaturalTouchMarketing.com



CARE THROUGH TOUCH INSTITUTE, 415-345-9265, OR WWW.CARETHROUGHTOUCH.ORG. THE NINE-MONTH HANDS-ON MASSAGE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM AT CT FOCUSES ON DEVELOPING SKILLS TO ENGAGE AND EMPOWER HOMELESS AND MARGINALLY HOUSED PEOPLE THROUGH TOUCH.

that was around him. Together, they washed his body and oiled his limbs with sweet-smelling oil, then poured light powder over his body. She was struck by how closely this treatment resembled massage.

As soon as she finished another man came rushing in the door, handed her a brown sack, turned, and ran away. "The sack was still warm," she says. "In that sack was a baby who had just died. I did the same thing with the baby as I had done with the man. That was my second little being to massage that day."

Finch stayed in Calcutta for a long and difficult month. "Every day I stayed was a day I wanted to leave," she says. "Every morning I'd say 'God, can I go now?' It would have been so easy to run down the street and get my train ticket. But something would say, 'No, not yet.' Something told me I would know when it was time to go."

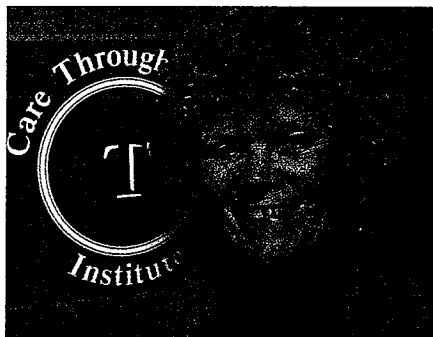
CARING THROUGH TOUCH

One day, Mother Teresa approached Finch while she was working in the home for the developmentally disabled. "She saw me working with a person who was very violent. I had him sitting on his bed, and I was cradling him in my lap and doing massage on him. I wasn't even aware she was there," she says. "When I finished, she approached me and said, 'It's time for you to go home. Do there what you've been doing here.' I said, 'What was I doing here, Mother?' And she said, 'You were caring for our people through touch.'"

When Finch returned to California, she knew there needed to be changes in the way she taught massage. It had to become more heart-centered. "I didn't know how to make that shift, but I knew the direction I'd go in," she says.

She expanded the internship program at the school and began sending students into hospitals and hospices more often. The change in

When Finch returned to California, she knew there needed to be changes in the way she taught massage. It had to become more heart-centered.



direction was fulfilling and exciting, but she knew there was more to do.

In January of 1997, Finch took another sabbatical. This time, instead of heading to India, she headed into San Francisco, into the heart of the city's Skid Row, the Tenderloin district.

"I didn't have a clue where to go," she says. She did have a contact though. "I called this person and said, 'I'd like to talk about how I might be able to institute some care through touch in the Tenderloin.' And he said, 'Come.'"

She met with Daniel O'Connor, a chaplain at Saint Anthony's Foundation, which feeds some 2,500 people a day and runs a free clinic, recovery programs, transitional housing programs, and other homeless services. O'Connor took her to meet with the directors of the clinic, to see what they would think about including massage therapy.

"They asked why massage therapy would be helpful for their people," she recalls. "I said [the homeless] have a lot of physical conditions that would benefit from massage. Second, they're people who would never think they could afford massage. And, third, they're people who a lot of people don't want to touch in that kind of way, but they're in need of skilled, nurturing touch. They looked at me and said, 'How soon can you start?'"

She started immediately. And it was an instant success with the clients. As before, she soon had lines forming of people who wanted to receive a massage.

But she also began to realize that, down-at-the-heels as her clinic clientele was, there was still another group of people out there who weren't even able to get to the clinic. She was inside a building. But they were out on the streets. "I wanted to go where those people were," she says.



Defining Boundaries

Massaging the homeless isn't a simple process. This population can be tricky to work with, and therapists need to be prepared, Mary Ann Finch says.

Body issues are paramount with the homeless. "Our training is about how you touch the boundary of another person, which is their body," Finch says. "For homeless people, that boundary is very vulnerable. For these folks, the integrity of their body is all they have."

The massages CT practitioners provide to the homeless are chair massages of the neck, shoulders, and feet. "For the most part, homeless people are far too traumatized to be able to experience the kind of massage most massage therapists are trained in," Finch explains.

Therapists who work with homeless people need to be grounded and prepared to receive some of the pain these people might bring to a massage. "When we're working with people's bodies, they not only bring to you the obvious condition that they're aware of, like a headache or back problems, but they also bring a lot of unconscious feeling, things that are just too unbearable for them to put into words," Finch says. "We get to experience a lot of those unspoken, unmetabolized thoughts and feelings."

She says the therapist's willingness to enter into a real relationship with the homeless person is critical. "This is a ministry, it's not a business," she says. "You need to come from a place of compassion, which is not about pity. You need to believe, 'I'm coming here to give what I have to give you and to receive what you have to give me. We're both healers, and who is to say who is the healer at this moment?' The playing ground has to be even."

She encourages massage therapists who want to pursue this sort of outreach to begin by contacting an area agency that works with the homeless. "See what services are already offered, and if massage therapy might fit in with those services," she says.

She started to wander the streets, going into the parks. And one day, she went into a coffee shop and got two cups of coffee, then walked up to a park bench and sat down. On the other end of the bench was an elderly man she'd seen there before. "At that moment, I had the same feeling that I'd had when I'd gone into the circle of lepers the first time," she says. "I didn't know how to start the conversation."

Finally the man said to her, "Did you want to say something to me?" She offered the coffee and he accepted, but then they settled back into an uncomfortable silence.

"Is there anything else you wanted to say to me?" he finally asked.

"I wanted to offer you a neck and shoulder massage," Finch said. He didn't answer, so she stood up and came around and stood in front of him. "I told him my name, said that I was a massage therapist, and that I was looking for ways in which I could help the homeless who sit on park benches. He looked at me and replied, 'You can start with me.'"

She began massaging his neck. And other people began to wander over and ask him how it felt. He told them it felt great. "From there on, it was all morning long," Finch says.

She knew then she had found her calling. "The people who can't come to a clinic—because they're too sick or too afraid or too inebriated or demented—this is where we need to bring our care." **m&b**

G *Rebecca Jones is a Denver-area freelance writer who specializes in issues related to spirituality and social justice. Contact her at killarneyrose@comcast.net.*