

Naturopath's vision creates a clinic in Thailand; HIV-AIDS patients benefit as member of well-known B.C. family changes their lives

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Page: A1

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Fifth of 10 profiles of Canadians making their mark in the world.

MAE ON, Thailand -- Laura Louie's approach to international development is unique.

For her, it's not something best left to governments and big organizations like CARE. But neither is it the exclusive purview of gazillionaires like Bill Gates and rock stars like Bono.

Writing a cheque is just not hands-on enough for the Vancouver naturopathic doctor. Maybe it's the massage training she's had, but when she considers changing the world, her view is tightly focused and one of the tenets of Chinese traditional medicine seems to inspire her thinking: "With healing, touch is so important."

It's a Tuesday morning and Louie is only a few days off the plane from Canada when she arrives at the Mae On Clinic, bright and early so she can consult with head nurse Unchalee Pultajuk before the patients start arriving for the weekly HIV-acupuncture clinic.

Louie's not billing this as a farewell tour, but essentially that's what it is.

The clinic she set up in this little village is self-sustaining now.

"They don't need me here. I worked my way out of a job," she explains.

There are no regrets her baby is walking; in fact, she's ready to celebrate.

"That was the whole point of doing our project. We train local people in our programs. This is our pilot project, so we've trained them in acupuncture and basically we've worked our way out of a job.

"But we still support them financially ... And if at some point they want more continuing education, we'll provide that for them as well. But right now, it's finished."

Mae On is a government hospital in northern Thailand, about 35 kilometres from Chiang Mai. Significantly, it's also about 200 kilometres from Southeast Asia's infamous Golden Triangle of heroin production and on the long-distance truck route from there. It only has 18 beds and there is no public transportation nearby, but it does have an HIV-AIDS program that attracted Louie.

In 2002, she was already on a sabbatical from her busy natural medicine practice in Vancouver and came to Thailand on a break from the volunteer work she was doing in India.

It was a busman's holiday and, after Louie saw the work they were doing with HIV patients at Mae On, she volunteered to help out.

Much convincing, cajoling and hands-on demonstrations of acupuncture later, the doctor got the go-ahead from the hospital director to open her own free clinic in a small outbuilding beside the hospital to treat the growing problems that patients were facing living with the side-effects of the antiretroviral drugs they were taking to treat HIV. The pain, fatigue, numbness, loss of appetite and insomnia were badly affecting their quality of life.

Before Louie could start training the nurses in acupuncture and massage and outfit the clinic to take patients, however, she needed money.

Back to Vancouver she went to hit up -- or, as the soft-spoken Louie puts it, "approach all my friends and family" -- for donations. She wasn't a registered charity, just a woman with a mission. And it was an act of faith in Louie that, when she got back on the plane, she had \$30,000 in her pocket.

The clinic opened its doors to outpatients in August 2004.

Patients move from the acupuncture beds to a chair where a tuina massage completes their treatment. The traditional Chinese massage is done with bare hands -- "with healing, touch is so important" -- and Louie credits it with helping break down the "stigma" of HIV among her patients and their families.

In the small surveys done at the clinic, 96 per cent of patients claimed physical improvements from the acupuncture and 86 per cent said their quality of life has improved.

Louie, 47, comes from a well-known Vancouver family. Her grandfather, H.Y. (Hok Yat) Louie, founded IGA and London Drugs and the family still runs the companies. You can sometimes see the Chinese influence in her face and dark hair, but her tall stature probably has more to do with her Russian mother.

As a child growing up in North Vancouver, Louie travelled extensively with her parents, resulting in later life with a strongly international outlook.

She graduated from UBC in geology and worked in the field for several years before making the leap to natural medicine.

At 30 she was accepted to Bastyr University in Seattle, one of the best of the very few North American universities that train naturopathic doctors.

It was there she began working with HIV-AIDS patients and she's been doing it ever since.

One of her most famous patients in Vancouver is HIV activist and artist Joe Average and he's helping out with the Mae On project, donating paintings to the annual silent auctions she now organizes in the city to help fund the clinic.

Louie looks nothing like the socialite she could have been. Her hair is long and pulled back from her face.

Her clothes are long too -- long skirt, long scarf, long earrings and a long necklace. It's a look that works well in rural Thailand, where modesty is expected and appreciated.

At the top of her agenda now, however, is finding another Thai project.

If it can be near Mae On, so much the better because the doctor hopes to use nurse Unchalee to help do the training. She envisions a small and focused project, like Mae On, that could become self-sustaining within a few years.

Louie doesn't profess to a grandiose vision for her "development work." For her, it is simple and personal.

"I'd like to give back," she says.