

The International Journal of Transformative Touch

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 4

9-2-2022

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Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Judith (2022) "Inspire Yourself: Volunteer!," *The International Journal of Transformative Touch*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/ijzbtt/vol2/iss1/4>

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Inspire Yourself: Volunteer by Judith Sullivan

At least twenty years ago at a Zero Balancing Faculty meeting, someone mentioned that it would be great if we could offer free ZB sessions. That kept resonating with me, so in 2008 I first volunteered by offering ZBs for a harried staff at the Obama campaign before I started volunteering at the Haven.

The Haven's mission is to end homelessness in the greater Charlottesville community where I live. Motivated by radical hospitality (the homeless are guests here), The Haven strives to be the point of entry for people seeking stable housing. I like that they open the doors wide for any and everyone, no matter their circumstances. Every day, the trained staff and community volunteers come together, working side by side to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring for our neighbors. Even though it was once a church and has added offices, it functions more as a community meeting place.

I have been offering sessions to staff at The Haven since 2009. I met Kaki Dimock, the first director, during the time I was offering Zero Balancing sessions for the Obama campaign workers and we talked about doing something like this at The Haven.

Kaki Dimock recalls, "You just called me up, introduced yourself and the idea of offering free short ZB sessions to our staff or guests, invited me for a brief session as a demo, then we tried it. The demo session secured the deal. I felt great! And it was a clothes-on session which would be comfortable for staff, volunteers, and guests. We started with staff first—which was an astonishing gift of time, touch and kindness to overworked, dedicated people. Then you included some clients, which was an equally astonishing gift to people whose bodies are liabilities; demanding to be fed, kept safe, etc; all things that are made nearly impossible without housing or money. Radical to help these folks stay in, take care of, get reconciled with their vessels. Big gains had by just these things but also practical gains from Zero Balancing of relaxed focus, deep connection with our bodies, recognition that self-care is important enough to take time during the work day. Staff called ZB day 'noodle day' because our muscles were so relaxed after, they were like cooked noodles. Your continued flexibility, support, kindness spoke volumes to us. Your continuity is an amazing act of grace."

Since then, The Haven has been working to serve guests facing homelessness and address the housing crisis in Charlottesville. There are a few paid staff, the rest are volunteers who have different schedules each week. Stephen Hitchcock was hired in 2010 and became director in 2014 and recently retired. The Haven became an independent nonprofit in 2014.



Building a Team

At the beginning either Roxanne Broadbent, another ZBer or I came to offer sessions, or sometimes both of us schlepped our tables across the parking lot to the church. Eventually, I asked other people to be a part of it. One woman offered seated massage a couple of times. I called more friends. We slowly made a team. After about five years we received two treatment tables as a donation from Cindy

Janechild a local nurse practitioner and Zero Balancer. A welcome relief so we would not have to carry ours! Other practitioners who joined us at times were Cynthia Allred, Carrie Gristantas, Tahira Haroon, Helen Truslow, Becky Robinson, Becky Graves and now sometimes Susan Tracy and Lynette Meynig. My idea is to have a solid team of three to four people so that if one or two of us can't come, the monthly ZB sessions are covered.

We go to the Haven the third Thursday of each month which is also when the staff have a meeting. Gradually we have been able to offer sessions to more of the guests, though that stopped during COVID for about three months. The guests have been very wary about being touched, but it seems that over the years, some find it very relaxing and stress reducing. The staff love it! We do 10–15-minute ZB sessions and always ask them to walk after the session and be aware what is different in their body. And then to tell us so that they make it concrete.

When I talked to Stephen Hitchcock, the current director, he said that the most important thing is that we come every month. They have offered acupuncture, yoga, Alexander Technique, breathing, meditation, and more, but ZB is the only thing that has stuck. Everything else starts and then stops after two or three months. He feels that ZB has really leaned into the community (his words), and they have leaned into us.

The ZB Volunteers Share their Experiences

Roxanne Broadbent: Judith had already begun organizing and showing up at the Haven for ZB before I entered the picture. I knew she would be at the 2010 ZB New Year's Day gathering and was looking forward to introducing myself. I remember going up to her, and saying, 'I understand you have a volunteer program at The Haven. I would like to become involved.' This was before I was certified, of course, but what a great way to get my hands on a lot of bodies and practice. I quickly learned that I had nothing to do with it. Even with limited experience, the work was effective.

Why have I continued? Because being at The Haven is showing up in the bosom of humanity. Every guest has a story, and I am humbled by the employees who willingly work in the bowels of this example of society's dysfunction, the depths of the have-nots because of public policy and uncompassionate acts of others. These folks are being a voice for disenfranchised people, and if we can offer them a few minutes of reconnection to their bodies, to their breath, the innate space within, long forgotten from the stress of their jobs, why wouldn't we do it? The same is true of the guests. For them to experience a few moments of safety, of peace within their life of trauma, how could I not want to offer what has been given to me?

Susan Tracy: Makes me feel good. It introduces and opens up something magic. ZB taps into something people don't have access to—relaxation and healing and then they want it and want more. There is a stillness (we work in the church sanctuary). It feels good to me. It is our portal to the magical world.

Judith Sullivan: I am always amazed how 10-15 minutes a month can relieve longtime issues like hip or back pain or migraines. And doing this work here just makes me joyful that we can offer something of value that would be difficult for any of them to get. I wish we could do the same to the police department, fire department, 911 operators...all those departments that deal with stressful situations all day long. I was impressed with how 10 minutes once a month impacted people's health. Eleise's migraines disappeared. Someone else's back pain was significantly decreased, another's hip pain got better. Some people began to exercise more. I think that just becoming more aware of their bodies made a big difference, sometimes even the choices they made. I specifically remember working on one of the guests who was very hesitant about getting on the table. The director, Stephen, was on the next table and kept encouraging him to stay on the table. I could tell that he hadn't had much "good" touch and that it was difficult for him to accept. This man was an alcoholic, who, after the session, for the first time, was able to go into rehab. WOW!

We see six to fifteen people a day between 10 AM and 1PM. We have focused on the staff because they are a constant and bridge builders which leads to the guests coming. Guests have loved it—eventually!

Interviews with The Haven Staff

Our ZB team asked the staff how long they have been working at The Haven, how long they had been getting Zero Balancing sessions here, how did it make them feel, and did they notice a difference in their co-workers.

Stephen: I love ZB in a way I don't love massage. It invites questions I didn't know how to answer but they are important to be asked. It helps to bring energy to new staff members. It is interesting to lie on the table, supine and have your body listened to. For 10-15 minutes your body and situation receives focused attention. When we are asked to walk after the session, we have the opportunity to attend to what's happening, to what we are feeling. As we walk, we move through time and the process that was started moves through us. This gives us the time and space we deserve.

Francesca: I am the kitchen manager at The Haven and I've been getting ZBed since March 2020. I come because I think in this really hectic and fast-paced work environment, we rarely take time to sit

and be with ourselves and be with our emotions, and just slow down and take a moment for ourselves. It's a really special tradition that everybody gets to partake in and it's been so amazing to see some of our staff, like our tough guy, manly man staff, come in here and get cared for and really enjoy it. It's a big equalizer that everybody gets to be touched and cared for.

Laura: I am the day shelter manager for The Haven. I am going on three years here as a staff member. I started getting Zero Balancing a couple of months ago. It has made a big difference as far as relaxation, helping me to get my body aligned and just stress relief. A lot of the staff have talked about it and have started getting Zero Balanced as well. It's one of the things that we look forward to once a month. I am hooked! You see how we fight for the tables!

Isaiah: I've been receiving ZBs since I've been working here about six months ago. I find I'm more relaxed, especially when I'm having a stressful day like today. It's helped me calm down some and release some tension. It gives me a sense of peace and gets me more in touch with my body, like I see I need to stretch a bit more. It allows me to center myself and my thoughts too.

Kay: I've been working at The Haven approximately a year and a half. And I've been coming to ZB Day as long as I've been working here. I have noticed that it re-centers me at least for the week. I can take stock, take a breath, and focus on myself for a few minutes to give more. Like taking a few minutes to feel better, I can give more. The staff has a staff meeting right after this and we all come in more emotionally willing to be involved, because we get burned out during the day. I feel I'm ready to engage more. I love ZB!

Schylar: I work at The Haven and this is the first place I have ever had Zero Balancing. I find that in a very stressful profession like social work it's very relaxing and it eases some of the tension in my body from work, emotional stress and physical stress. It's really enjoyable to have this service offered in my workplace. I've been coming four or five months now and I can definitely feel a difference after I come compared to how I feel before I come to Zero Balancing sessions. I notice less stress and more relaxation in the staff. We all appreciate it and look forward to the Thursdays when you all come.

Jamey: I've been getting ZBs for 8-10 months. Every time, I notice I'm lighter, can stretch more; soreness and kinks are out. On the staff, Ashley had a limp and started to walk better. All together we feel better and we can't wait for the ZB day, trying to get it twice a month. People think it is a massage and I tell them it is better than a massage. I come every time. It is one of the best things we have in this organization for the staff.

Herb: I am the outreach coordinator for The Haven. I've known Miss Judy for 12 years since the inception of opening this place. At that time the stress level was so great that if it hadn't been for Judith and her staff and the peace ZBs brought, reducing the stress level and my pinched nerve, I don't know what I would've done without her. Even once a month gives us more than most of us who work here have ever had. It's been especially helpful for me because I do a lot of substance abuse work and deal with mental health issues with most of our folks. The amount of stress that brings, sometimes Judy is the only one that can relieve that stress so I'm most grateful for having her and her staff. Most folks have never had this kind of work and for Judith to take your time and come in and do it for free, not only for the staff, but some of the guests also that shows the heart of the person who is doing it which is probably the most important thing, because they really care about us. To have this kind of resource I can't say enough about it.

Owen: I'm the Director of Operations at The Haven. I've been here for nine years and getting ZBed that whole time. It's an amazing time for me and the other staff of The Haven who are in a service role to others and to the community to step back, take a little time for ourselves, let things settle internally with the assistance of Judith and the other Zero Balancers, and yeah after 10 minutes on a table I feel like I'm able to re-enter my work with new energy and some new creativity and I'm grateful for that time. I feel more grounded typically after a ZB session, more presence and connected to the earth. And during staff meetings we might be more balanced and possibly a little more friendly!

Ashley: I saw you in October and November 2021 for the first time. I love ZBs. The biggest thing that I have noticed is that I had a significant limp from rheumatoid arthritis and the Zero Balancing mixed with the instruction I get from you to take home and practice, my limp is minimal. I notice that now I have far more days walking like a normal human than I do walking like a penguin. I still do have my days, and took your advice with some of the exercises and imagining myself being grounded through my body, and walking straight with it and I take those things with me. So if I notice that I am having a day limping more and I catch it, I'll stop and take a deep breath, and picture myself centered and start over.

Even my posture—even walking has helped my posture. At my other job the chairs don't have the best backing, so I stop and I say "What would Miss Judith tell me about the way I am sitting in this chair?" And it helps me when I stand up. I have noticed myself having a lot more patience over the last one or two months. I'm a lot calmer and I appreciate that just for myself. I look at other people differently because of my own personal journey. So with me having a little more patience and working on my inner self, I don't really want to be around some of the people I was around previously who have a lot of animosity within themselves because I will say "OK, I understand your frustration but how can we get past this in a different way," and if they don't want to work on that, I choose not to be around them. So I guess my circle has changed a little bit!

Spreading Touch Skills

We are excited because six people from The Haven staff signed up and took the special ZB I class in Charlottesville at The Haven in 2022. We are now mentoring them the third Thursday of each month from 10-11. Two of them have started practicing on staff! New possibilities are blooming.

Is Inspiration in your Future?

There is a future for ZBers in volunteering. Some do it with their clients, accepting clients who cannot pay or who pay a reduced amount. More than ever there is an opportunity for working with refugees. Volunteer work has ripples that we may not see, but are there at the deepest level of our society. We will keep you informed!

About Judith

As an expert practitioner and teacher Judith Sullivan has over 50 years of experience helping adults, children and infants heal from stress as well as many painful physical issues. Based in Charlottesville, VA and teaching internationally, she bridges the healing arts and science by using precise touch for profound results to heal the body naturally. Combining CranioSacral Therapy, Zero Balancing and Visceral Manipulation, Judith treats the whole body/mind/spirit matrix of each individual to correct imbalances and restore optimum homeostasis in the body. Contact Judith at chijude.com