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Tissue Stimulus

Emeryville massage school growing as demand soars

By Kristin Bender

EMERYVILLE — Even in an economy that has been called the worst since the Great Depression, people aren't giving up their Swedish, shiatsu or sports massages.

Every year, massage therapists give more than 114 million massage treatments, according to the National Massage Therapy Institute, a training center with several U.S. locations.

And massage therapy is among California's 50 fastest-growing professions, just behind environmental science, according to the California Economic Development Department, which projects job openings to increase by about 26 percent statewide by 2016.

So, it's not surprising that the National Holistic Institute, the state's largest massage school with a campus in the heart of Emeryville, is building a new 24,000 square-foot campus across the street from its smaller Hollis Street space.

The new, \$9.5 million campus will accommodate the growing need of those who want to complete courses to become massage therapists. It's expected to open at the end of the year. Low-cost massages will continue to be offered to the public for the purposes of training students.

More space is needed because enrollment at the school is up by 30 percent compared with last year, said co-owner and President Tim Veitzer.

"I think people who are out of jobs are looking for a career where there are possibilities for growth," the 38-year-old said. "Despite the down economy, our hiring partners are always looking for hires."

Earlier this month, the institute, which also has locations in San Jose, San Francisco, Petaluma and Encino, announced its placement rate for graduates in 2008 was 87 percent. And those graduating from the school's 720-hour training courses this year won't likely have trouble finding a job, Veitzer said.

"People may not be taking the luxurious vacations or buy the fancy cars, but they are more stressed than they have ever been, and they still need to take care of themselves," Veitzer said.

Founded in 1979 by Carol Carpenter, the National Holistic Institute began in a house on College Avenue in Oakland. It was the first massage school in California to become nationally accredited and then offered federal financial aid through the U.S. Department of Education. By 1989, the school moved to its current location in Emeryville. To maintain its national accreditation and ability to offer financial aid, it must meet the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training's minimum placement standard of 70 percent for graduates.

For more than 25 years, the Emeryville location was the only National Holistic Institute massage school. In 2005, the San Jose and Petaluma campuses were added. The Los Angeles school opened a year later, followed by the opening of the San Francisco campus in 2007, Veitzer said. About 100 students are usually taking classes — everything from anatomy to traditional Chinese medicine — at each site during a term. It can take up to a year to complete the 720 hours, depending on a student's schedule, said Veitzer and his partner Mason Myers.

The two high school buddies bought the school six years ago and have been combining

their business skills and desire to help people to make the school successful.

"People are wanting to have a tangible skill that can help them in good times and bad times," said Myers, 38.

With the unemployment rate in California at about 11 percent last month and more than 63,000 jobs lost in April, according to the state Employment Development Department, Myers said he is seeing new students coming from many industries, but particularly the restaurant and retail industries.

"They were most likely in an unskilled business before coming here," Myers said.

But not all students come from unskilled backgrounds.

Malinda Braet, 36, of Emeryville, worked in pharmaceutical sales until two years ago, when she left the high-paying job. "I felt like I wasn't really doing anything and I felt like I was a slave to the system," she said.

Sure, she had the company laptop and cell phone, the American Express expense card and the six-figure salary, but she said she was unfulfilled. So, she set out to learn a trade that would allow her to work with her hands and help people. The training has been intense, she said, but worth it. "Everyone is pretty confident they can get a job," she said during a break in a class recently. They know they are going into the market with more skills than a lot of massage therapists.

Braet is learning deep tissue massage and foot reflexology, but she is also learning about public speaking, business mission statements, filing taxes and building successful business Web sites. "My sales background has helped me and it will help me sell myself," she said.

There are other reasons massage is a growing profession. You can get a 10-minute chair massage at the mall or the airport for \$10 or go to a franchise such as Massage Envy in a strip mall on your way to the supermarket. There are many businesses, such as sports clubs, spas, and cruise ships which have increased their hiring of massage therapists, even for part-timers. In December 2008, careerbuilder.com rated massage therapy as the No. 1 part-time job opportunity for 2009.



Students Christina O'Brien, left, and Malinda Braet smile over their test results Tuesday at the school's campus in Emeryville.

The industry also got a boost on Jan. 1 when a law went into effect in California regulating massage therapy statewide. Under the law, there is a non-profit, statewide organization, the Massage Therapy Organization, to certify legitimate massage practitioners and therapists by setting clear, consistent statewide rules. That means that everyone practicing massage therapy will have to play by the same rules no matter what city they are in.

Another reason for the growing employment rate in the massage industry is an increasing number of people are learning about the benefits of massage. The medical benefits of "friction" were first documented in Western culture by the Greek physician Hippocrates about 400 BC. These days, massage therapy is being used to treat painful ailments, decompress tired and overworked muscles, reduce stress, rehabilitating sports injuries, and promote general health, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"It's not a luxury," said Sharlene Philip, a graduate of National Holistic Institute who has taught there for the past six years. "It is about health care and well-being and a way to manage stress and even Western medicine is acknowledging so many ailments are based on stress."

