

# 21st Century Spirituality

## Faith in Action



By Carol S. Wolf

## Greater Buffalo Counseling Centers, Inc.

*"For all the struggles eased, all the fears conquered, and all the hearts lightened..."*

Some things are meant to be. I am on the UB Committee for Spirituality in Healthcare. We were invited to participate in UB's Faculty and Staff Health Awareness Fair on Thursday, March 8th. For the previous two weeks, I had been in contact with a group I thought I would write about but I had not heard back from them and my deadline was rapidly approaching. The booth next to me at the fair was occupied by the Greater Buffalo Counseling Centers, Inc. (GBCC). Kathryn Hallborg, their representative, and I talked during the morning and she explained to me what they did. I had never heard about this counseling center. Then Doug Salmon



Mary Ellen Kranock and Dr. Charles A. Weiss

came and during the afternoon I heard a passion in him also for this ministry and the people they were helping. By the end of the day I was convinced "*this was meant to be my April article.*"

I spent an evening in their beautiful place, the third floor of the University Presbyterian Church on the corner of Main St. and Niagara Falls Blvd. They have a large comfortable community room, beautifully decorated, a conference room and several meeting rooms. I watched as clients came in and were pleasantly greeted and offered coffee or tea. Then, their counselor met them and took them to one of the meeting rooms. I spent the evening talking with staff and counselors and observing. I was impressed.

### Early Beginnings

Forty-five years ago in 1962, the GBCC began as the Community Counseling Centers. It was started by a group of pastors who wanted to improve their pastoral counseling skills. They got in touch with the Psychological Association, looking for someone to train them. Dr. Joseph House got involved and for the next few years they had about 29 clients per year. They grew to several sites on the West and the South Side until funding became a problem. They also began to provide

training to students from local colleges and universities, as well as training people from all walks of life who wanted to volunteer to assist others through difficult times in their life.

### Mission Statement

*Provide client centered-counseling concerning relationships, communications, marriage, divorce, separation, parenting, aging, and life changing crises; and to provide counselor training/supervision by licensed psychologist and social worker.*

**The Center is open every Thursday evening from 7:00 p.m.-10:00 p.m.**

The Honorable Elloeen D. Oughterson, until her death, was a strong advocate for services in the field of mental health. She served several terms as a member of the GBCC Board of Directors and was instrumental in arranging for the donated space at University Presbyterian Church in 1974. She often described GBCC as a premier organization in providing this valuable service at low or no cost to clients without the obstacle of a long waiting list.

Douglas Salmon, Past President and Counselor shared with me that he retired after 29 years as a high school counselor and laughed as he said, "I felt there was



**Kathy Hallborg and Paul Gerstner**

still some counseling left in me.” Seven years ago, he saw an article and ad in the *Buffalo News* by Paula Voell that GBCC was looking for counselor trainees. He applied and became a counselor there. “From there,” he said, “I went on the Board of Directors, became secretary and then President of the Board.” He explained that he spends about three hours per week counseling.

He went on to say, “There is a certain satisfaction when a client that has an ‘ah ha’ moment, when they recognize their problem and create a plan to work through it.” He said, “I remember one man came in who had lost his wife. He rejected help from his family and friends. I just listened and he had a chance to talk about the good times and the difficult times of their relationship. Over a number of sessions he reestablished contact with family and friends.”

Kathy Hallborg told me how GBCC has evolved over the years. She explained a few years ago several board members retired and left the area. They were struggling, when the Wendt Foundation funded them while they reorganized.” Now we see about 200 clients a year and would like more people to know about us. We just had our Third Annual Awards Dinner to recognize those people who have helped us. I have personally gone through a period of depression and know how difficult it can be. About 15 years ago,

Elloeen Oughterson told me about his organization. My husband was involved first, then I came on the board. We have had strong continuity and inspiration from Dr. Charlie Weiss. As Board members, it is our job to keep the organization viable. Nine years ago I retired from U.S. Customs, so now I have more time to volunteer.

Dr. Charles A. Weiss, Ph.D., said, “In 1969, Dr. House, the first psychologist here asked if I would be interested in joining him. In 1970, I began at GBCC. This is one of those things that keep life exciting and rewarding. There are wonderful people here and they do great work.” I asked Dr. Weiss what was a memorable experience. He laughed as he told me about his being introduced, 11 years ago, to the new social worker, Mary Ellen Kranock. “I remember meeting her, and she looked at me and said, ‘I really don’t know many psychologists that I think very much of.’ We talked about how we could effectively work together and it wasn’t long before we found we really worked well together. She is a wonderful person and an outstanding colleague. All the people here are the reason I come back each week, and it is so rewarding to help people get their lives back together.”

Mary Ellen Kranock, LCSW-R The first thing she said to me was, “I absolutely love it here. There is a wonderful staff and we provide a service here for people who cannot afford a private



**Rachel Mannella Kraatz**

practice. People who come here find it comfortable and friendly. We also try to schedule a person immediately. The other thing I really enjoy is providing clinical training to up-and-coming counselors. What’s really great is that some of the volunteers have changed careers and gone on to get degrees in counseling. We help them along. We have become a family here.”

I watched Liz Czech, receptionist, greet each person with a smile and conversation. She told me how she works full time in a genetics lab and often has lunch at a restaurant where her girlfriend works. Paul Gerstner, another customer was frequently there also. “One day I was telling my friend I’d like to find someplace to volunteer. Paul pulled out his card and said he overhead us, he volunteered at GBCC and it was a great place. I called and now I have been here two and a half years. I started out as a volunteer counselor, and then about a year ago, the person who was working as the receptionist was leaving and I knew that was what I really wanted to do. I remember one client came in and thanked me for always smiling and offering him coffee or tea. He said, ‘It means a lot to me.’ I had no idea something so easy and small



From left: Kathy Aman, Doug Salmon and Liz Czech

would make that much difference. It's a really great feeling."

Paul Gerstner told me he first heard about GBCC in 1989. "I was volunteering at Crisis Services. One of the people heard me interviewing and asked if I would like to do one-on-one counseling, and I said I don't have a degree in counseling. She said that I had good interviewing skills and with training I could do it. So, I applied in 1990, and have been here every since. Working here, I discovered I was semi-good at this counseling, so now I know what I want to be when I grow up. I retired from 33 years at Ford Motor Co. and I am now in the five-year Health and Human Services Masters program at UB. I remember one client who came in for marriage counseling, then divorce counseling, then single parenting. Then, I met him one day in a grocery store and he told me how he had remarried and his life was so much better because of GBCC."

While I was there I was introduced to Rachel. I was told she had volunteered here during her college years and was now a social worker upstairs. Rachel Mannella-Kraatz explained to me, "I heard about GBCC from Kathy Aman, a counselor here. She has been a long-time friend of my family. I was at UB

working on my Masters degree in social work. I applied here in January 2004 to be a volunteer so I could get experience. They accepted me and I was here for about 10 months. I graduated in 2006 and am now a Licensed Master Social Worker. I have come full circle. I work upstairs at Child and Adolescent Treatment Services. This was a great place to learn."

### Angels and Miracles

Everyone shared angel and miracles stories with me. They said, "It seems like when there is nothing left to keep the organization going, something miraculous happens, such as":

- One of the board members had a car. He donated it to us and in turn another board member's son bought it. We realized that money.

- We received a grant from the Presbytery of WNY.

- We received a grant from the Wendt Foundation.

- A former counselor gave a large donation when his 401K matured.

- Our treasurer's neighbor passed away and his son asked him if he knew any group he could donate a grand piano to. Our treasurer said, "I sure do." We realized about \$9,000.



Western New York's Newspaper for the Young at Heart

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- Ad Council grant helped us design a brochure and log of a road leading to a rainbow.

- Judge Oughterson's niece has come on the board and in honor of her aunt she is funding a website.

- Rachel's grandmother belonged to the Italian Club. They were in the process of dissolving it and had money in their treasury. They decided to donate it to GBCC.

- This church is fantastic. It is a safe place, warm and comfortable, which helps people coming here.

For more information on volunteering, donating or becoming a client, call Greater Buffalo Counseling Centers, Inc., 3330 Main Street, Buffalo, New York 14214, 833-5993.

If you know of a successful program in your community, please let me know at [caroldickwolf@cs.com](mailto:caroldickwolf@cs.com). If you know of a successful program in your community, or would like more information, please let me know at [caroldickwolf@cs.com](mailto:caroldickwolf@cs.com).

*Carol S. Wolf is married to her husband Dick for 47 years. She has 2 sons and 4 grandchildren. She is a writer, speaker, storyteller and leader of workshops and retreats. She is an Associate Spiritual Director at the St. Joseph Center for Spirituality and a member of the SUNYAB Spirituality in Healthcare Committee.*