

By Amanda Abrams



Kay Madsen first discovered acupuncture while suffering medical problems in her late 20s.

Getting to the Point

A onetime lawyer's career takes a sharp turn

Kay Madsen seemed destined for a career in medicine. Born into a family that included a dentist, a microbiologist and a doctor, she and everyone else assumed “that I’d go to medical school,” she says. So in college, she duly registered as premed.

Her brother was doing his medical residency at the time, and Madsen got a disturbing peek into her future. Her brother’s descriptions of the medical practice suggested “it was too focused on pharmaceuticals,” she says. “The standard of care seemed not just subpar but wrong.”

Madsen went on to become a lawyer instead. But when she experienced a range of medical problems in her late 20s that doctors couldn’t seem to resolve, she turned to alternative practitioners.

She says they eventually cured her—and rekindled her long-dormant interest in healing. Alternative medicine “became the very attractive road,” she says. “I wanted to learn all about it.” Stressed and unhappy with the long hours of a Washington attorney’s life, she decided on a major career shift.

Fifteen years later, the 49-year-old Madsen is a licensed acupuncturist with a thriving practice in Silver Spring. To be able to heal people “feels fantastic,” she says.

An Idaho native now living in Olney, Madsen wound up in the Washington area in her early 20s when her husband was stationed with the military here. The couple eventually divorced, but she remained, obtaining a law degree at American University’s Washington College of Law and getting a job in employee benefits law at the Labor Department.

Eight years later, Madsen switched to a private firm downtown. But even as she became a rising star who was frequently called upon to give speeches in her field, she found herself feeling burned out. “There was a ridiculous amount of pressure,” she says.

Given the stress, she began grappling with health issues: blurred vision, gynecological problems, skin conditions. Fruitless appointments with doctors confirmed what she’d felt in college. “All of it was palliative, none of it curative,” she says. “It left me with a sense of ‘Oh, you’re not going to help.’”

So Madsen researched alternative therapies and discovered acupuncture. It took a few years to find the right practitioner, but once she did, “relief was amazingly fast.”

With the support of her second hus-



"It's all about patterns of disharmony that manifest in some physical symptom."

—Kay Madsen

band and parents, she quit her job and signed up for a master's program at the Traditional Acupuncture Institute in Columbia, Md. (now the Maryland University of Integrative Health in Laurel). There, she learned Chinese medical theory and the mechanics of sticking needles into key points along the body to free up *chi*, or vital energy. Madsen graduated in 2002 and established the Family Acupuncture Center in Silver Spring two years later.

"I see chronic things—migraines, menstrual stuff, infertility, pain management," she says. "It's all about patterns of disharmony that manifest in some physical symptom."

After a two-hour diagnostic session, Madsen will come up with a treatment plan for patients. In the case of migraines, for example, she might diag-

nose "rising liver yang," which she treats by inserting disposable stainless-steel needles—each about the thickness of three hairs—into eight or 10 points along the feet and lower legs. The needles are painless, says Madsen, whose patients typically pay \$85 out of pocket for an hour-long session.

Michelle DeLucia, a Silver Spring resident who manages a health club, had never visited an acupuncturist when she contacted Madsen a few years ago. But she was suffering from allergies, stress and perimenopausal symptoms that doctors had failed to alleviate. She was tired of experimenting with medications.

"It wasn't an overnight thing, but [acupuncture] definitely brought me relief," says DeLucia, 50, who describes Madsen as almost "guru-ish" in her dedication to acupuncture.

She may be committed, but Madsen strives to balance work and home life. Having her own business means she can pack her schedule during school hours and then leave to look after her 11-year-old daughter, Nicole. "That would never have worked at the law firm," she says with a laugh.

Her short-term goal these days is to bolster marketing and social networking for the business, which was hit hard by the economy. But down the line, she'd like to do more public speaking about the benefits of acupuncture.

"A lot of people walk in who've been through it with Western medicine and didn't get what they needed," she says. "I'm always surprised how quickly something can unravel that they've been living with since childhood. That's the gratifying part." ■

Amanda Abrams is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C. To comment on this story, send an email to comments@bethesdamagazine.com.