

Chiropractic Colleges, Practitioners Expanding Roles as Community Leaders

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Early in our profession's history, chiropractors were so blatantly shunned (disregarded and jailed) that the notion of doctors of chiropractic and chiropractic organizations being sought after and valued as community leaders would have seemed absurd. D.D. Palmer himself spent 23 days in jail in 1906 for "practicing medicine without a license." Hundreds of early chiropractors chose to spend time in jail to defend their chiropractic principles. Yet today, due to the progress and advancement of the profession, our colleges, associations and individual practitioners are playing an ever-increasing role in community leadership.

As we increase our interaction with, and contributions to, our local communities, we enhance the environments in which we live and practice. We also expand our sphere of influence for sharing the chiropractic message and stimulating interest in the profession. Community service and leadership activities provide a powerful vehicle for every chiropractor and chiropractic supporter to increase the prominence of the profession and foster understanding of our unique health paradigm.

A Broad Spectrum of Involvement

The sheer number and scope of community leadership activities our colleges, students and practitioners are involved in is amazing! Perhaps it's because of the nature of most doctors of chiropractic - to be caring, committed and compassionate. Perhaps it's because chiropractors also tend to be independent thinkers, possessed with almost boundless energy and determination to make a difference in the world. But certainly the profession, as a whole, appears to be generously sharing its time and talents in many ways that spread well beyond the delivery of our crucial chiropractic services.

Clearly, each of the chiropractic colleges throughout the country is involved in various local fund-raising activities and charity events, and such projects are critical. However, as the profession grows in stature and influence, we are also seeing greater community involvement in key leadership positions, and in a much broader range of areas. Peers in academia and in the business community are seeking out our faculty, administrators and staff for their expertise. Academic, business and civic organizations are inviting us to partner with them in community visioning, advocacy and strategic-planning activities.

In Spartanburg, South Carolina, for example, Sherman College of Straight Chiropractic is a key player in a consortium of local colleges that have teamed up with the mayor's office to market their region as a "college town." The college, along with its five sister colleges in the area, also recently co-sponsored the tenth annual South Carolina Humanities Festival. Such partnerships between local academic institutions and a chiropractic college would have been almost unheard of even 20 years ago.

But if our colleges are to gain in stature and influence, we must continue to seek out and promote such linkages. Jerry Hardee, EdD, president of Sherman College, agrees: "Chiropractic colleges must take a substantial leadership role in the communities in which they are located. We have a

unique opportunity to enhance both the perception of the profession and general understanding of the benefits of chiropractic care. Direct involvement in the communities served by our colleges is the key to unlocking this opportunity."

Our colleagues at Life Chiropractic College West are also highly involved in their local community in the San Francisco Bay area. Life West President Gerard Clum, DC, serves on the board of directors of the Family Emergency Shelter Coalition, and was named the 2001 Businessperson of the Year by the local chamber of commerce. The college sponsors an annual backpack drive and numerous holiday events for needy children. Life West students serve as mentors and tutors to local schoolchildren. "We are as much a part of the fabric of our community as any other organization, and our involvement should be expected. In addition, if we espouse an ethic of service, we must be more involved than others," comments Dr. Clum.

Likewise, at Texas Chiropractic College, faculty serve as judges for area science fairs; the college is the host site of the Pasadena Artist of the Year event; and President Shelby M. Elliott, DC, was named Citizen of the Year in 1996. The college was also named Business of the Year in 1997 by the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce. Chiropractic thrives on the synergy of such activities and the growing awareness they bring of the benefits and expertise of the profession.

Local Flavor Colors Community Involvement

With each of the three Palmer chiropractic colleges located in such geographically diverse regions of the country, we see clear differences in how our community involvement and leadership activities are manifest. "Each Palmer campus is unique, and therefore, contributes and gets involved in its own way," explains Lisa Walden, director of recruitment, with responsibilities on all three campuses. "But it's clear that our level of community outreach, involvement and leadership is growing throughout the system."

On the Palmer Florida campus, for example, our new college is nestled in the Port Orange community, with a strong emphasis on neighborhood and family. In just our first year of residence there (and even prior to opening),⁰ the college has quickly become a valued part of the local scene. Port Orange civic leaders sought out and greatly supported Palmer's location of a campus in the area, and clearly view us as a partner in building the local economy and enhancing the culture. In the past 12 months, the college has also played major roles in varied local activities, such as sponsoring the fireworks for Port Orange Family Days; raising holiday funds for needy children; spearheading blood drives and canned food drives; and helping clean up 700 pounds of trash during the Halifax River clean-up.

In addition, the college hosted a radio program about chiropractic, and the Palmer Florida library serves as a tutoring site for a local literacy program. Heather Stierwalt, director of student services and financial planning, concurs that the college is consistently included in major, high-profile activities in the area and is clearly seen as a valuable resource. "We enjoy a highly rewarding and mutually beneficial relationship with the residents and businesses of Port Orange," she explains. A strong community leader herself, Ms. Stierwalt teaches a course on personal economics at two local high schools as a Junior Achievement and Chamber of Commerce volunteer; serves on the board of directors of the local YMCA; and has completed the Port Orange/South Daytona Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program.

On the Palmer West campus, located in the heart of Silicon Valley in San Jose, California, our civic leadership takes a somewhat different focus. Our students and faculty operate five outreach clinics to ensure chiropractic care is broadly available to a diverse population, including those in homeless and substance abuse shelters, and recent immigrants with significant language barriers. In

addition to the outreach clinics, our students and faculty are in tune with the sports enthusiasts of northern California. One quarter of the student body participates as trained volunteers to provide emergency, on-field care and chiropractic services through the Palmer West Sports Council. "Our students are very well-respected for the care they provide to athletes in the region, and beyond," explains Executive Director of Clinical Services Greg Snow, DC. "Student members of the Sports Council travel to Hawaii every year to care for athletes in the intense Ironman competition, and they staff numerous regional events. These include Olympic-level swimming competitions; professional beach volleyball; a World Championship Mountain Biking event; the NBA-sponsored Hoop It Up competitions; and the Special Olympics. Through our participation as health care providers for the athletes at these events, we are able to spread the message of chiropractic care to a broad range of health-minded people."

Our community activities in Davenport, Iowa, again take a form that best suits the local environment. Our Palmer Diversity Advantage program, for example, focuses on helping Palmer build and strengthen relationships with multicultural community leaders in the Quad Cities. The program kicked off here recently when we hosted internationally known author, speaker and poet Maya Angelou to a sold-out crowd of 2,400. Almost 100 minority leaders in the local community met on campus prior to the event, to dialogue about diversity issues and work together to bring as many community members to campus as possible to hear Ms. Angelou's message. Also under the auspices of the program, Palmer staff members are interacting with diversity leaders at other colleges and with major employers in the area. They are representing the college at a greater number of multicultural events, and hope to host one of the top speakers in the country for a forum on diversity and multicultural sensitivity that will be open to colleagues from other local institutions. "Our neighbors are increasingly seeing Palmer as a leader in the multicultural community and as a catalyst for positive change," Walden explains.

Similarly, the local community sees Palmer College as a leader in the health care arena. Our faculty provides strong links with organizations such as the American Heart Association and American Red Cross. David Quist, DC, assistant professor, teaches our emergency procedures course, but also helps students apply some of those skills directly in the community to benefit others. Along with the American Heart Association, Palmer College sponsors the local "CPR Saturday" and helps train hundreds in these lifesaving skills. In addition, Dr. Quist trains Palmer students to teach the "Protect Your Back" program in area businesses.

And, of course, Palmer faculty and staff serve and have served in such diverse leadership roles as presidents of their local synagogues; on the boards of the American Heart Association, the AIDS Project Quad Cities and the Downtown Davenport Partnership; on the local school district's Superintendent's Advisory Committee; and even as president and vice president of the North Scott Pony Baseball League. Throughout the country, Palmer Chiropractic University System faculty, staff and students have become valued leaders in their communities and highly effective ambassadors for chiropractic.

Get Involved; Make a Difference

Chiropractors and other small-business owners have long understood the value of community involvement in building their professional practices, but real community leadership stretches well beyond networking. To effect real change in your community, and to realize growing opportunities for sharing chiropractic's vision of health, you must be willing to invest significantly in terms of sharing your time and talents. Here are a few thoughts for taking your (or your organization's) outreach activities to the next level.

Serve, but also lead. Every organization needs committed, tireless individuals to carry out the work

of regular operations and events. We should all be willing to serve in these roles as committee members and behind-the-scenes helpers, but we must also look for ways to take our contributions to a higher level, by seeking out and preparing for key leadership positions. As more people interact with chiropractors in significant community leadership positions (e.g., on the local school board, as mayor of a small town, or as chair of the annual health fair), the greater our opportunity to educate fellow opinion leaders about the value of the chiropractic message.

Look for connections. Expanding the sphere of influence of the profession also means expanding our sense of where chiropractic and chiropractors "belong." No one thinks twice today about medical doctors who speak out on important topics such as gun control, domestic abuse or children's television programming. These topics are not within the traditional realm of medicine, but physicians are able to comment on them as community opinion leaders. Likewise, our chiropractic colleges, professional organizations and practitioners have valid opinions to share regarding community health. We must constantly look for ways to connect community activities with chiropractic. "Back to school" means increasing awareness about the effects of heavy backpacks on the spine. The opening of a new maternity ward suggests an opportunity to share information about the effects of birth trauma on the nerve system. A golf charity event provides an opportunity to talk about the impact of vertebral subluxation correction on coordination, concentration and muscle function. A ribbon-cutting ceremony at a new day care center might stimulate an editorial about wellness/development care and the importance of maintaining a healthy nerve system that is prepared to capitalize on every window of development presented to a growing child.

Always explain chiropractic. It may appear obvious, but most of us don't do it often enough. At every committee meeting you attend, every charity event you volunteer for, and every campaign you chair, people ask you what you do. Make sure your answer goes well beyond, "I'm a chiropractor." In just one golden minute, you can stimulate interest and educate others about chiropractic's vision of true health. Your answer doesn't have to be long, but it does need to include an explanation of the impact of proper nerve function on overall health. Our profession doesn't need a full-page ad in *The New York Times*. We need chiropractors who use every opportunity presented to them to tell a single individual what chiropractic really is, and how chiropractic care can help express more of his or her potential for physical, intellectual and emotional well-being.

A Privilege and Responsibility

Chiropractors have finally been welcomed "onto the playing field" as legitimate and valued leaders in the community. It's up to us to step up to the plate, seize the opportunities presented to us, and become strong voices in our communities. We are fortunate to be practicing at a time in which public acceptance and use of chiropractic services is at an all-time high. However, if our goal is to further increase the understanding and use of chiropractic care, we must use this window of opportunity fully and responsibly. We must be leaders who think beyond the welfare of our individual organizations or practices, and consider how we can leave the profession in a healthier and stronger position because of the skills, energy and voice we share with our neighbors today.

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