

Acupuncture a 'calling' to help others

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SUPPLIED Pie's daughter at the pop-up clinic.

When New York native and acupuncturist Piedad Barillas Bird arrived in New Zealand 10 years ago, little did she know that Kaikoura and New Zealand would capture her heart.

As well as meeting her now husband Brendan Bird, who is also an acupuncturist, the Kaikoura resident fell in love with the sense of community. This bond was unexpectedly deepened in the wake of the Christchurch and Kaikoura earthquakes.

During the chaos that followed, Pie set up an emergency pop-up clinic in New Brighton with the aid and support of Acupuncture New Zealand. Three other pop-up clinics also emerged in Christchurch, enabling more than 1000 people to receive treatment for earthquake-related stress and anxiety.

Pie clearly remembers the day in February 2011 when the Christchurch earthquake hit. "I was teaching at the New Zealand College of Chinese Medicine in the CBD and was about to start a class. After everything stopped moving, my first thought was to make sure that everyone was safe and out of the school. Then I wondered, what can I do to help?"

Luckily Pie's friend in the States, Marion Bergman, knew just what to do. Marion is a member of Acupuncturists without Borders (AWB), an organisation which provides acupuncture to people who have been through traumatic events such as natural disasters and war. After hearing the news Marion set up a relief package of 5,000 needles and supplies. This was matched by the distributor, and within 24 hours the package was on its way to the red zone.

Within days Pie, Brendan, and Paddy McBride, a colleague from Nelson and President of Acupuncture New Zealand at the time, had the New Brighton clinic up and running. Pie's eager students were ready and willing to be trained in trauma relief and played a huge role. The clinic was open for three and a half months and treated up to 80 patients each week.

When the 7.8 quake hit Kaikoura five years later, Pie instinctively knew what was needed.

"The clinic treated over 230 patients in three months. People were (and still are) deeply affected, and the service helped them come together and feel safe. There was a huge demand."

Although most commonly known for its effectiveness for musculoskeletal injuries, acupuncture is used to successfully treat a vast range of physical and psychological conditions.

Like any approach to medicine, Pie warns acupuncture is not a 'magic bullet'. It has, however, been scientifically proven to enhance wellbeing – and is particularly powerful when used in conjunction with Western medicine. "The two disciplines work together synergistically, a marriage of east and west."

While Western medicine tends to focus on treating specific symptoms, acupuncture is about maximising an individual's overall health. Pie believes that treating the underlying causes rather than the symptom represents huge potential to reduce the burden on primary healthcare.

A career in acupuncture wasn't always on the cards for Pie, but now she wouldn't have it any other way. She was an undergraduate at Quinnipiac University for Health and Sciences in Connecticut when her sister started receiving acupuncture to treat anxiety. Despite being skeptical initially, Pie soon became curious.

She eventually dropped her whole Western approach to medicine and studied oriental medicine and acupuncture.

Helping clients deal with trauma and emotional distress is something which Pie feels she was fated to do.

"I was in the final year of acupuncture school in New York during 9/11. It was an emotionally trying time where I learned a lot about the strength in working together helping the community and learning about trauma relief protocols.

"I came to New Zealand because I wanted to use acupuncture to give back to others, and I've certainly had the opportunity to do that. The rest, as they say, is history."