

Life Extension Magazine April 2011

REPORT

Donna Karan Designing Integrative Health Care

By Kyle Roderick

Imagine a world famous fashion designer partnering with a major hospital to pioneer integrative cancer care. This medically avant-garde scenario is happening right now in New York City. Donna Karan's non-profit Urban Zen Foundation and Beth Israel Medical Center are redesigning cancer care to make it patient-centered, combining holistic medical therapies with allopathic treatments. Transcending the standard disease-centered, drug-focused cancer regimens that offer little in the way of mind/body nurturing, Urban Zen and Beth Israel are defining a new standard in health care, bringing life-enhancing results to patients, their loved ones, and the health care professionals who are working with them.

Karan founded the Urban Zen Foundation in 2006. Urban Zen's Integrative Therapist (UZIT) program, co-directed by yoga teachers Rodney Yee and Colleen Saidman Yee, brings optimal nutrition, yoga lessons, Therapeutic Touch treatments, and aromatherapy to Beth Israel's cancer patients

To date, among many of Urban Zen's and Beth Israel's collaborations is the hospital's Urban Zen Sanctuary on the cancer ward. If there's one semi-public space that needs to impart comfort and peace, it's a cancer ward lounge. Most are typically noisy, harshly-lit spots filled with scarred, uncomfortable furniture. Beth Israel's Urban Zen Sanctuary is a quiet, cozy and softly illuminated haven designed by architect David Fratianne and Alex Stark, a feng shui master. Fine art photographs adorn the walls, while wooden tables enhance the room's organic and comforting vibe. Here, patients, families and hospital staff can find respite and cultivate calm, soothing mind and body.

On the day of the Urban Zen Sanctuary opening, Donna Karan, 61 years old, sat down with Life Extension Magazine to discuss her goals and projects. "I've always dressed people," Karan says in her husky, New York accent. "Now I want to address people and their well-being. My ultimate dream is to help not only the patients in the cancer ward beds but those in Beth Israel's outpatient clinics, too," she says. "Along the way, I'd like for the Urban Zen Integrative Therapy program to include a nutritional component so that patients can eat fresh produce, fresh vegetable juices, nutritious broths, fortifying soups and herbal teas. Hopefully," she ventures, "the program here at Beth Israel will serve as a template for other hospitals."





Karan's mission to improve health care with integrative medical approaches is rooted in her experience as "... A wife, friend and helper during two long and painful cancer journeys. Both my husband, Stephan Weiss," she explains, "and my close friend Lynn Kohlman died of cancer." Weiss, who battled lung cancer for seven years and died in June 2000 at the age of 62, was a painter, sculptor, and Ms. Karan's business partner. Her most trusted adviser, ally, and muse. Helping negotiate lucrative licensing agreements and structuring departments as the company rapidly expanded throughout the 1980's, Weiss played a key role in helping the company develop into an international brand.

Donna Karan with her late husband Steve Weiss. His cancer experience inspired Karan to fund the non-profit organization Urban Zen and fund Beth Israel Medical Center's Urban Zen Medical Integrative Therapy Program.

On one dark day, "Stephan was being cared for at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan and his physician told him: 'There is nothing more I can do for you.'" Karan relates. "Nothing more," she repeats in a hushed monotone, reliving the bad news. "Nothing more? I found this unacceptable. As long as there's life, there's hope. You don't just give up," she says with a determined light in her eyes. "This is where holistic and Eastern remedies come in, as they can help balance the mind and body while improving the patient's quality of life."

In addition to the several specialists attending Weiss, Karan wanted to look at him holistically as a patient, Karan says. "What is the health history and life context of this patient and how do you treat him or her at the mind-body level?" While Karan tried to improve quality of life throughout much of Weiss's treatment, she also felt herself increasingly stressed as his caregiver. To help both of them stay as balanced as possible, Karan enlisted the aid of several alternative health practitioners.

"Stephan received vital support from what he called 'the woo-woos,' meaning the acupuncturists, yoga teachers and other healers I brought in," Karan says. For example, one day, Weiss was having breathing difficulties. "Stephan had the most cutting-edge medical treatment available and yet it could do nothing to help him breathe," she says. "I got a yoga teacher to come and teach him to open his airway and lungs." Weiss went from gasping for breath to enjoying deep, slow, long breaths that made him feel more energized. "Practicing breath-work and yoga gave my husband a measure of control and comfort that he'd never known previously," Karan says. "Breathing has a potentially huge effect on quality of life. This is why the UZIT program teaches yoga and breath work for patients to do in bed, or anywhere else. The therapists also teach the nurses about breathing so that when they enter the patient's room, they take their hand and breathe together for 20 seconds."

More vital support from Karan came in the form of the fortifying soups, broths, and vegetable juices that she brought into the hospital or fed Weiss while he was at home. "The food Stephan was given in the hospital was often processed, heavily salted institutional food," Karan says. "The canned fruits and vegetables and sugary desserts are not suitable for a healthy person, and certainly not for a cancer patient," Karan says. "My dream is to have trolleys of organic foods, broths and fresh-squeezed vegetable juices rolling through the halls of Beth Israel," Karan says. "When are hospitals going to realize that

food is medicine?" Dr. Merrell acknowledges that it's on Beth Israel's agenda to deliver optimally nutritious foods to the cancer ward (and other patients). "Changing our food service might take some time," he concedes, "but we are committed to the goal."

Both Karan and Weiss found his cancer ward nurses "... totally heroic, angelic and overworked," Karan remembers. "Most people don't realize how physically and emotionally draining it can be to care for cancer patients. Stephan loved the nurses for their stamina, kindness, and humor... and for comforting him and all the other patients." When Weiss and Karan discussed how she might one day reform cancer care in hospitals, "Stephan made me promise never to forget the nurses," Karan says, "which is why the Urban Zen program trains them to do breath work with patients and for themselves, along with moving meditation and other therapeutic modalities."

Like Weiss, Lynn Kohlman fought a valiant and long (five-year) cancer battle. As she battled breast and brain cancer, Kohlman continued to work out, practice yoga, and stay fit. Asserting that one can flourish with dignity, beauty, and innovation despite cancer's toll, Kohlman took post-op, artistic black and white photos of her body. Wearing double mastectomy scars with a winning smile, Kohlman's images are hauntingly vibrant. After her brain cancer surgery, titanium staples encircled her shaved skull.

"Lynn and I were great friends for years," Karan recalls, her eyes lighting up, "she was the fashion director for my DKNY line and she also set the tone for Urban Zen. She was my inspiration." A natural beauty, Kohlman had been a fashion model in the 60s and 70s and then a fashion photographer.

What would Stephan Weiss say if he could see what Urban Zen and Beth Israel have accomplished so quickly? How would Lynn Kohlman respond to the sensual comforts of the cancer ward's Sanctuary? Karan's eyes well up with tears and she looks away to collect her thoughts.

After a five second pause, she says, "I think they'd feel glad that Urban Zen and Beth Israel are working together to benefit the cancer community and their loved ones. And I think they'd love Beth Israel's atmosphere because it's warm, life-affirming, and nurturing." Indeed, the place is as warm, life-affirming and nurturing as the Urban Zen philosophy. "We want to raise awareness of the human condition and help initiate positive change," Karan says. "We're off to a great start with this pilot program and we look forward to achieving our goal of spreading the UZIT program to other hospitals. I just want to say 'thanks' to our many supporters and collaborators."

For additional information, please contact www.urbanzenfoundation.org



Louis Harison, MD, philanthropist and Urban Zen founder Donna Karan, Woodson Merrell, MD, and Harris Nagler, MD, at the opening of the Urban Zen Sanctuary on Beth Israel's Cancer Floor.



Philanthropist Donna Karan, and Urban Zen team members trained in holistic modalities.