

finding

story by PARI NOSKIN TAICHERT
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Grace

"When I graduated from college, I wanted to change the world," says Suzette Lindemuth, the founder of the Center for Ageless Living. Today, she sits at a round pink table in her office above the Garden Gate Day Spa and Salon. It's one of the many structures on the Center's six-acre property located off the highway between Los Lunas and Belen. Tall cottonwoods, with their gnarled branches, border the land to the north and south. Plum, quince, cherry, peach and other fruit trees stand near the pond, their first tiny spring buds greeting the new season. Though the office's windows are closed against the morning's chill, Sandhill Cranes can be heard trilling in the distance.

When Lindemuth began building the Center in 1990, she knew she wanted to create an entire environment with all the components possible to encourage healthy, joyous aging. "I wanted a sustainable community where we'd recycle water, we'd grow our own food, where there would be enough diversity on campus so that people here would be able to build friendships—and so that people from the outside would want to come and support our efforts," Lindemuth says.

To do so meant looking at the relationships between the various systems in which—and with which—we humans interact daily. Lindemuth soon realized her approach to these goals couldn't be summed up easily in a sound bite. So she resorted to art. The Center's logo is a loam-colored tree with five green leaves. Each represents one of the Center's divisions: the day spa and salon, restaurant, community programs, residential living and elder personal services. What makes this effort so interesting is the way Lindemuth integrates her goals and services into a vibrant interdependent whole.

"We focus here on the art of aging gracefully. We define grace as the ability to have inner flexibility, resilience and acceptance," Lindemuth says, pausing to consider her next words. "Good, healthy food is essential to the process, as is exercise. We also want to cultivate inner and outer beauty. There's strength, too—



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Flavor

both mental and physical. And we want to celebrate wisdom—the sage part of us. We want and need to share the journey that elders have gone through.”

Every building on the Center’s grounds has a well-conceived purpose to support the entire endeavor. There are three assisted-living homes, each of which houses 15 residents. Every week, in addition to yoga classes, these elderly occupants automatically receive either a massage or salon appointment. But what about the other people in their worlds? The Garden Gate Day Spa and Salon grew out of Lindemuth’s understanding that no one exists in a vacuum. “Caregivers and adult children often feel guilty or overwhelmed by the aging process. They also worry about finances—their own and those of their parents,” she says. Lindemuth wanted these important people, as well as her own employees, to be able to relax and benefit from affordable spa experiences too.

At the same time, as director of the Center, Lindemuth needed to be mindful of its financial health. “Forty percent of the elderly here are low-income,” she says. So Lindemuth created the public spa to meet several needs. The facility has all the amenities you’d expect to find—full body massages, facials, wraps, salt glows, foot rituals and more. A customer can spend the entire day at the spa enjoying its services, taking a dip in the outdoor year-round heated pool and one of the two hot tubs. Able-bodied visitors might not be aware of this, but Lindemuth made sure the rooms are big enough to accommodate people in wheelchairs or those who might need an assistant to enjoy a spa experience too.

So many aspects of the Garden Gate Day Spa are environmentally sound and sustainable that it was selected by *Day Spa Magazine* as the 2010 Top Green Spa for its commitment to “green.”

And then there’s the food. Lindemuth knew from her own childhood in rural Pennsylvania how much better fresh herbs and produce taste than their cellophane-wrapped counterparts. She added several gardens to the Center’s grounds, including some with beds raised high enough for people with limited mobility to get their hands in the rich brown soil.

From the beginning, Lindemuth served good healthy food to her residents. But what about other people? Shouldn’t caregivers, families, and people in the surrounding areas have access to the same quality comestibles? That’s how the Green House Rotisserie came into being. Since its opening as a take-out bistro in 2004, it has become a popular resource for fresh baked breads, pastries, gourmet main meals, soups, salads and the restaurant’s signature rotisserie chicken. “So people visiting our Center can come for a full-day spa experience and then pick up dinner before they go home,” says Lindemuth, with a grin.

The Center’s food programs don’t end there. Lindemuth makes a point of buying from local growers whenever possible because she firmly believes that building communities involves supporting other communities. She also started the Field to Food initiative when her gardens provided more bounty than the Center could use. Each growing season, Lindemuth partners with the Belen Meals on Wheels program to get her fresh produce to more than 150 homebound recipients. She is now working to involve other local farmers so that even more people can be served.

To build and increase a sense of community internally and externally, Lindemuth has also developed educational programs such as intergenerational gardening days with her residents and local school children. Each year, gatherings and celebrations are a mainstay in the Center’s large open park. One of the most popular events is its Field to Food annual gala fundraiser in June.

But how does all of this feed into “aging gracefully?” Though she has always found jobs to help people live better lives,



| Founder Suzette Lindemuth

Lindemuth found her passion in the mid 1980s. At that time, she worked at two rehabilitation hospitals as a recreational therapist. She saw that there weren’t many options for older people who couldn’t live alone any longer, but who didn’t need intensive medical care. Then Lindemuth read Betty Friedan’s *The Fountain of Age*. “I remember being incredibly moved by the book,” she says. “It opened my eyes about aging and about isolation.”

If there weren’t good options for the elderly who needed assistance, Lindemuth would create them herself! She soon opened the first of three residential homes in Albuquerque. But in the beginning, her good intentions didn’t go quite as planned. “Even in a small group milieu, a person can feel utterly isolated,” Lindemuth says.

She soon realized that many older people correlate self-sufficiency with being alone. “They say, ‘I’ve lived alone all of my life,’” Lindemuth shakes her head. “But it’s not true! They were born into families. Most married and had children. We’re social beings. We all function better when we’re part of a supportive, loving community.”

Lindemuth wanted to create an environment where people “feel welcomed and part of a community very quickly.” Building community however, involves more than a token game of bingo. Lindemuth wanted to really improve her residents’ lives. She offered all kinds of activities and exercise programs. “We had on-site salon services in my homes, because people who look better usually feel better too,” Lindemuth says. “We provided massages, because touch is so incredibly important to human beings and the elderly often have lost spouses or others who might give them this much-needed connection.” She also introduced alternative therapies such as acupuncture, chiropractics and aromatherapy.

Lindemuth even tried to address her residents’ attitudes about eating because she knew that better food meant better health. “One



time I offered a wonderful gazpacho soup in one of my homes. This was in 1987." Lindemuth's eyes widen with amusement and she soon bursts out laughing. "A cold soup made of raw vegetables? They threw it at me!"

Even with tomato-stained clothes, Lindemuth didn't give up. She learned from those experiences and vowed to build a community where people of all ages could be involved with people of all ages, a place where a fresh picked lettuce—from her own gardens—would be on her residents' plates, a place founded on green principles of living where everything supported and depended on everything else.

Since her college graduation, Lindemuth has had decades to think about what makes a real difference in the quality of peoples' lives. A lot of it comes down to this: "Community isn't just one person. We all need to give a little--and why wouldn't we?" Lindemuth looks up, her brown-gray hair backlit by the window's reflection, her face in semi-shadow. "It's such a simple little thing. We're all here to help each other."

The Center for Ageless Living is located at 3216 NM 47 south of Los Lunas. 505.865.8813. www.agelessliving.com. Their annual Field to Food gala gourmet dinner and celebration will be held on June 24. Tickets are \$45/person. 505.865.8813.

Pari Noskin Taichert is a multi-published novelist, two-time Agatha Award finalist and founder of Murderati.com. She is also chair of Left Coast Crime Santa Fe which will bring mystery authors and readers from around the world to the City Different, March 24-27, 2011: <http://leftcoastcrime.org/2011/>

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