



# FINGERPRINT

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## George Herman House Specialty Clinic by Linda Novick '79

George Herman House (GHH) is a transitional residential home and life skills program. For over 40 years it has supported women aged 18 – 64 who are living post-hospitalization with mental health issues. It is located near Dupont & Spadina, where it provides both shared and single rooms for ten women. It has a unique holistic healing and wellness philosophy that promotes healthy eating, overall nutritional awareness, and complementary practices known to play a pivotal role in emotional, physical and mental health. GHH also provides personal goal setting and group work programming with compassionate support to assist the women in strengthening their life skills and in helping bring structure to their lives.

Sutherland-Chan's Term 4 GHH Specialty Clinic quickly became an important part of the life of the house. Staff members report, "The most noticeable difference is the effect your visits have on the culture of the house... There is a palpable lightness in the air. After a massage, the women tend to linger around the common areas for the afternoon, talking with one another instead of retreating to the isolation of their own rooms. There is more chatter and laughter, everyone is feeling a bit more relaxed and at ease... Every little shift in someone's mood is no small feat. Especially to those of us who perhaps live with a smaller range of emotion and social connection."

### The Setting

In GHH's homey setting, students treat residents on chairs or overstuffed couches in the living and dining rooms, in the library, on their bed, at a picnic table in the garden (weather permitting), or on a massage chair borrowed from the school. Creating and maintaining a "treatment space" in an environment even less private than the school's own student clinics – and providing effective treatment while at the same time doing their best with their body mechanics – offered new challenges to the students.

"Working with my patient allowed me to step out of my comfort zone of using the massage table as a safety net. It forced me to use my body and hands in different ways than I had before."

"This placement required me to treat on different surfaces (table, couch, chair). It challenged me to think about my body mechanics, how to make modifications, and to get creative when trying to access specific areas."



Katherine MacIvor modifies her biomechanics to treat her GHH patient on a couch.

## The Power of Touch

Students who have completed a clinical rotation at GHH feel that they grew both personally and professionally. Several found it to be a highlight of their S-C clinical education. “My experience at George Herman House was very rewarding. Getting the opportunity to have an impact on the lives of the women of the house really proves that the benefits of massage therapy surpass merely the physical.”

“My experience at GHH truly showed me what the power of touch can do. Working with the mental health population was different in that the treatments didn’t focus on musculoskeletal impairments but rather what massage can do to help with the patient’s mental and emotional well-being ... Musculoskeletal impairments may be the product of something beyond the physical, for example high stress, and if you can get to the deeper aspect of a patient’s presentation (staying within your scope), you can accomplish great things in treatment.”

Student therapists discovered, “how sometimes simple techniques can be more effective while working with the patients there.” “You don’t need to use every technique in the book to create a good outcome. Sometimes it’s the simplest forms that do the greatest work.”

## A Different Approach

“The George Herman House is a complete opposite setting to the sports clinic, where many come in to fix a problem or to get results right away. The mindset of sports clinic pushes you to think with your hands and to pursue results that way. The contrast of GHH is that thinking with your hands may not yield results for your patient. The GHH residents seem to get positive results more from the ability to empathize and to use your hands in conjunction with this mindset. I believe most of our group were getting more positive feedback once we accepted being present as a whole person rather than just hands as tools. Although I didn’t seem to get substantial quantifiable results, I believe I was able to be of beneficial aid to my client. The George Herman House really widened and solidified my foundation of what a therapeutic role can be.”

“I’ve always treated pain by trying to fix the patient mechanically. I never thought that pain could be caused emotionally. I’ve learned that my touch doesn’t have to break or stretch the tissue. Even the softest touch can make a big difference to a patient who is emotionally hurt.”

## The Therapeutic Relationship

A positive mentioned by many students was seeing the same patient for several weeks. The impacts were two-fold: it helped, “facilitate the client-therapist relationship and build a solid connection with my patient” and, “This provided me with the opportunity to work on the treatment planning process, allowing enough time to make updates to our goals and actually achieve some of them.”



Sarah Stevenson at work in the homey GHH environment.

“It gave us a chance to record and view our progression and achievements, which is very important, especially while in the school program.”

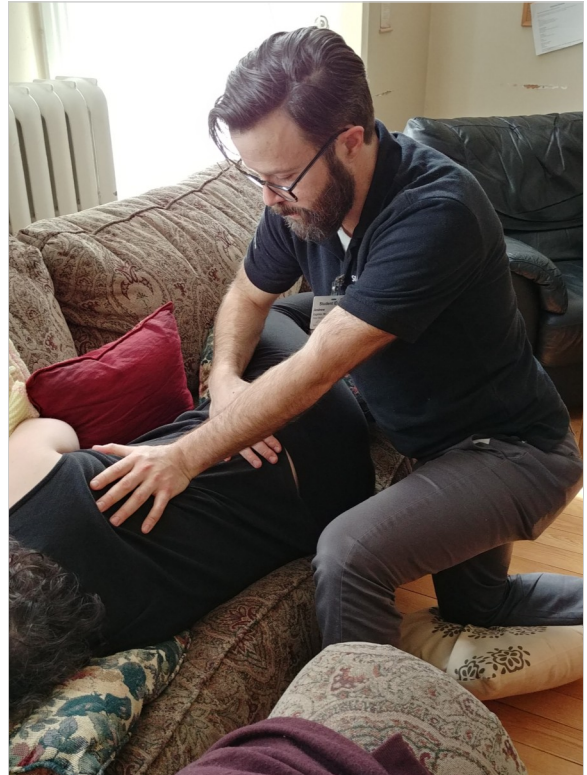
Our work at GHH was valuable both for the student therapists and for the GHH residents who took part. We received a note of appreciation from a resident: “I know that I speak on behalf of myself and the other women who participate in the massage therapy when I say that we are so grateful for the healing services offered by your student program. We benefit greatly on so many levels, including physical, mental and/or emotional.”

A staff member reported that, “One of our women has noted a big change in her physical comfort level. She had a back injury prior to receiving massage and now reports that her pain is much more manageable and her mobility greatly increased. As a woman who suffers with depression, increased mobility is an immensely valuable asset. We all know how important it is to get out and get some exercise to encourage a sense of mental well-being.’

“One of our residents noted a major improvement in the neck pain she has been living with for years. She has also reported that her anxiety levels are always significantly reduced immediately after the massage, and that the effects are sometimes benefitting her for days.”

Here’s how some student therapists summed up their learning experience: “My placement at George Herman House was a potent time of growth for me, as both a therapist and a whole person. By the end of my time there, I found myself more able to trust myself – my decision-making, my therapeutic touch, my boundaries, my competence and value.”

“Not only did I gain massage experience, I gained a deeper understanding and respect for individuals working through mental and emotional turmoil. It helped me realize that mental health concerns can be very hidden, not obvious at all. Massage can help patients with their musculoskeletal issues, but also with their mental and emotional well-being. I am so grateful to have shared the time and experience with everyone involved. I hope that massage therapy moving forward can help all people going through stress, anxiety, depression, PTSD, etc. This experience allowed me to see that massage therapy is so pertinent to wellness on all levels of functioning.”



Students like Andrew Bunker meet the additional challenge of being a trustworthy male when their patients often have traumatic associations.