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by Sue Wasserman

Anything is possible. At least that's what **Geraldine Plato** and **Margot Rossi** believe. Up until a few years ago, the co-founders of Possibilities of Wellbeing (POW), a health resource that champions individual and community wellbeing through education, lifestyle strategies, and integrative medicine, seemed unlikely business partners.

A non-profit executive, Plato's career had led her from a position as assistant director at the Penland School of Crafts to director roles at the Spruce Pine Montessori School and Asheville-based HandMade in America. Rossi, a well-respected acupuncturist and movement instructor in private practice at the Celo Health Center, was also on the faculty and administration at Asheville's Daoist Traditions College of Chinese Medical Arts.

While the two knew each other socially, it wasn't until Plato became a client at Daoist Traditions' student-clinic that they discovered the mutual depth of each other's interest in natural approaches to health and wellbeing. "Geraldine told me that as part of her leadership style, she encouraged her employees to find time to take care of themselves, whether through massage, acupuncture, yoga, or other natural healthcare alternatives," Rossi says. "I was impressed. It made sense that employees who took care of themselves would be happier, more creative and more productive, to say the least. I appreciated that Geraldine understood the long-term benefits reaped when people take care of themselves and feel healthy."

With a desire to transition out of executive management, Plato, whose passion for nutrition helped her maintain her health while raising three girls and juggling the demands of a full-time career, enrolled at the New York-based Institute for Integrative Nutrition. Ultimately, she earned an Integrative Nutrition Health Coach certification from the American Association of Drugless Practitioners. After graduating, the spark of Plato and Rossi's initial conversation turned to flame when they began sharing their common vision of a healthy community.

The two, who had long benefited from Eastern and complementary approaches to healthcare, knew others in their rural community could benefit from this information, something that resonated deeply for both women.

"In the late 80s, my mother was diagnosed with cancer," Rossi says. "She died after two years of conventional medical treatment. Mom was interested in alternatives and knew they were out there, but we didn't know how to find them or choose one that would be effective for her." Dealing with her own health issues as well, Rossi was inspired to return to her undergraduate interest in studying medicine. "At first, the thought of Chinese medicine seemed silly to my science-oriented mind. However, after researching its practical principles and remarkable efficacy, I felt compelled to earn a masters' degree in acupuncture, and later do an internship in China to further my clinical skills."

"One goal of POW," Rossi notes, "is not only to help people learn about alternatives to Western medicine, but how to integrate both approaches as well. There's a great deal of conflicting information out there. People often want to try a complementary approach, but feel their doctor disapproves. Local physicians often share their frustrations with us that they have neither the time nor experience to coach patients through their lifestyle choices. We want to help practitioners of differing perspectives work together with patients to offer the best care."

We're lucky that we have so many resources in our community to draw from for information on lifestyle, diet, movement therapies and other natural solutions.

A top priority was to help Yancey and Mitchell County residents learn more about the depth and breadth of complementary practitioners in the area through the compilation of an online directory, one they're excited to report keeps expanding. "People have been surprised by the wealth of complementary and alternative medicine practitioners who live in our community and contribute to the wellbeing of our residents," Rossi says.

Another critical component of their service is to cultivate understanding that the way we live and the food we eat impacts our health. Self-care, they believe, starts with self-awareness. "One of the things I realize now that my children are grown is how many corners I used to cut," Plato says. "I wasn't taking time for self-care. I was tired and didn't get enough sleep, but kept pushing myself to work."

What both Plato and Rossi appreciate about the Eastern practice of healthcare is that the practitioner and the patient gain awareness through questions focused on lifestyle components, ranging from digestion and emotional health to relationships and sleep, to personalize a diagnosis and treatment plan. "Health coaches are also skilled in listening deeply and asking high-impact questions," Plato says. "Through this type of interaction people gain awareness about what contributes to their illness. They are supported in taking an active role in keeping themselves healthy while making informed choices."

Because individuals expressed an interest in taking advantage of the expertise of both practitioners, beyond their private practices, the duo has begun offering VIP packages that combine integrative

nutrition coaching and Eastern medicine sessions on an alternating weekly basis for three or six months.

*"It's been exciting to collaborate with other professionals with the goal of helping our community explore the wisdom and usefulness of these natural options."*

"People have gotten used to looking for formulas," Plato says. "There is no formula. We believe that by working one-on-one to define goals, develop new strategies, and provide motivational support, clients will feel empowered to change their lifestyle and improve their health. Combining self-care with treatments like acupuncture, herbal medicine, therapeutic movement, and mindfulness practices, in a manner that suits the client's needs, super charges the results."

Since Plato and Rossi realize that awareness and education are critical to the wellbeing of the community as a whole, POW offers a wide variety of complimentary and low-cost workshops. The most far-reaching of these has been **Taking Charge of Your Health**, a series of sixty-minute presentations designed to help community members better understand a variety of health concerns from a natural medicine perspective. In partnership with Friends of the Yancey Library and individual sponsors, the duo provided the program last spring at no cost and purchased a variety of informative resources for the library.

While Rossi and Plato taught several of the classes, they also invited other local complementary healthcare practitioners to share their expertise.

"Clearly, an hour doesn't afford much time to talk about such important topics," Rossi notes. "Our goal was to open the door to a new way of thinking and show participants how they can begin to take charge of their health. It was exciting to see such a high level of interest from the community. What Geraldine and I learned is that you can create a compelling conversation in a short period of time. Group sharing is clearly a powerful tool for supporting change."

Participants wholeheartedly agree. "I didn't know what to expect," says Yancey resident Kim Simpson. "Initially, I thought I'd go to one class, say I made the effort, and be done with it. After attending the first class, however, I realized I wanted to learn more. Prior to the classes, I had no idea that burning scented candles can irritate allergies or that eating local honey daily can help prevent them. Because of the program, we try to buy organic food when possible and experiment with new recipes. I now exercise daily, just enough to break a sweat."

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"I don't like prescriptions," adds participant Harriet Gibbs. "What is so refreshing about these classes is that they offer a new way of looking at health. What I appreciate most about Margot and Geraldine is their advice not to make a lot of new changes all at once, which they said could lead to frustration. Instead, they thought it best to try a little bit at a time. I'm slowly trying some of the recipes and looking forward to more classes to continue my education."

Thanks to such positive feedback, POW is now laying the groundwork for another **Taking Charge of Your Health** series to be offered at the Spruce Pine Library. No-cost workshops will be held on Saturday mornings from 10:30 – 11:30 a.m., starting August 29. "We're still working on the content," Plato says, "but our vision is the same: to help people create strategies to improve their overall health."

As they expand into Mitchell County, they are seeking funding sources through sponsorships and grants. "The list of topics community members want to learn about seems endless," Plato says. "Funding will help us pay for materials, purchase new library books, and provide a small stipend for presenters."

Also in the planning stages is a multi-disciplinary approach to address diabetes. Rossi and Plato will be working in conjunction with Liz Peverall, MD at the Celso Health Center to create an innovative 12-week program that combines education, group discussion, and motivational coaching.

Dr. Peverall is excited about the opportunity to work together. "We're trying a different approach to chronic disease management, giving people the motivation, knowledge and tools to take charge of their own health," Dr. Peverall says. "Patients will have the opportunity to use evidence-based techniques to master nutrition, physical activity, weight management, and stress management for a more global approach to wellness, beyond just medications."

In their rare free time, both women, who are avid gardeners, can often be found with shovel in hand or weeding, musing over how they'll use the latest harvest for meals or herbal infusions. "We see our mission much like a garden," Rossi notes. "We're planting the seeds and doing our best to help them blossom, except in this case the flowers are our fellow community members. Obviously, as with a garden, there are so many variables that play a role in the outcome. But when it's all said and done, we believe in the possibilities."

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Readers can visit [PossibilitiesofWellbeing.com](http://PossibilitiesofWellbeing.com) to sign up for a monthly newsletter and learn more about how to participate in fall programs. Margot and Geraldine have appointments available in their offices at the Celso Health Center in Celso and the Yancey Counseling Center in downtown Burnsville.



They can be reached at [info@PossibilitiesofWellbeing.com](mailto:info@PossibilitiesofWellbeing.com) or by calling Geraldine (left) at 828.467.0979 or Margot (right) at 828.675.4369.

*Possibilities of Wellbeing Resource (POWR) Center: Our mission is to champion individual and community wellbeing through health education, lifestyle strategies, and integrative medicine.*



