



DONNA KARAN'S URBAN ZEN FOUNDATION **WENDY WEGNER**

Disappointed by the current state of healthcare, fashion designer Donna Karan founded the [Urban Zen Foundation](#) a non-profit committed to improving the healing and treatment experience for patients and families. Since 2008, Urban Zen has held cancer survivors and supporters at the heart of its community, and aim to integrate Western medicine with Eastern healing techniques. Urban Zen connects, creates and collaborates with others in order to raise awareness and inspire change in healthcare, education and the preservation of cultures.

Donna Karan speaks with Stand Up To Cancer about the Urban Zen Foundation:

What was your inspiration for starting Urban Zen?

I spent several years at my husband's bedside as he continually was in and out of the hospital treating his lung cancer. I appreciated the advancements of western medicine but I immediately understood that it was Stephen's cancer that was being treated and not my husband. So I brought in my posse of healers, yoga therapist, essential oil therapists, acupuncturists, Chinese medicine specialists and nutritional counselors. I saw and experienced the healthcare system very intimately and I knew I had to get involved.

What are some of your short and long-term goals for the program?

Our most important short-term goal was to create a model for integrative therapy that includes the patient, family and loved ones as well as care-givers and hospital staff members, and to create an environment where they all work together with doctors and nurses, patients and loved to have truly integrative medicine.

Ultimately, I want patients to be offered integrative therapies in hospitals and cancer care clinics across the country and eventually, internationally. We intend to do just that as more and more hospitals, nursing and medical schools and yoga studios incorporate this training program into their curriculums. If we can reach nurses and doctors in the early years of their training, they will be integrating healthcare immediately.

How can someone participate in your program as a patient, volunteer or employee?

Without question, the most beneficial way to participate is self-care: find a yoga class, practice meditation, eat a healthy diet. The most strategic way to volunteer your efforts on our behalf is to be a voice and an advocate for the Urban Zen Integrative Therapist model. If you live near Manhattan and would like to experience an integrative session, send an email to info@urbanzen.org and we can coordinate a visit. We have our growing website community and want to hear from cancer patients, survivors and their loved ones. What is the most valuable tool you've learned in your path to well-being? What do you find missing from this system? What would you like for Urban Zen to explore and present?

What's your advice for incorporating the "five approaches to integrative medicine" at home as part of someone's daily life or for preventative purposes?

Be nutritionally aware and construct a healthy diet. Visit Kris Carr's website [Crazy Sexy Life](#) she's dug a deep path to wellness through nutrition. Start a daily practice of yoga and meditation. For restorative yoga, I love Iyengar. Massage therapy and energy healing like Reiki can bring great relaxation. I'm also working on an Urban Zen self-care kit that will have tools and DVDs to help guide you.

How are your Patient Navigators chosen?

A Patient Navigator is very different than an integrative therapist but it is a critical role in the Urban Zen model. The Patient Navigator assists a patient and loved ones from diagnosis through their recovery. An integrative therapist is trained in several healing modalities and works with patients, loved ones, doctors, nurses and staff members. Once the navigator understands the needs of the patient and family, she suggests the possible therapies available at the hospital. Our navigator has a degree in social work, but the fact that she is also a cancer survivor makes her contribution and connection to the patients and family so more comforting. Nurses would make exceptional Patient Navigators. This is such an oversight in the system and it's always at the expense of the patient.

Urban Zen pays a great deal of attention to working with children. Can you tell us a bit about your current work with youth and future outreach programs, as well as your collaboration with "Success For Kids"?

The foundation has three initiatives: well-being, empowering children and the preservation of cultures. It's so important that we teach our children more than academics. We need to give kids the tools they need to learn how to make good decisions, to respect themselves and others. We also need to instill an early awareness about good food, and exercise. I love to watch my granddaughter practicing yoga. We have yoga classes for kids at the Urban Zen store in Sag Harbor. They love it! We collaborate with Bent On Yoga, a great organization dedicated to getting yoga into schools. Listen, we all know children are our future.

In a perfect world, what would America's health care program look like to you?

Perfection would be a patient navigator assigned to each patient who will guide you through your illness until you're on your path of recovery. Hospitals and private practices will offer a varied menu of integrative therapies that can continue when the patient returns home. Hospitals will offer fresh, nutritional soups and juices. Insurance will cover the expense of these therapies. I want a health care system that treats the patient, not just the disease.

How would you respond to someone who disagreed with or didn't believe in your integrative healing philosophy?

They should experience the integrative therapies or speak to someone who has. I wouldn't want to see any patient or loved one alone on this journey.

What advice do you have for doctors who want to integrate elements of Urban Zen's philosophy into their practice? How do you feel they can best "treat the patient, and not just the disease"?

Waiting rooms are the perfect setting for these therapies. Diffuse an essential oil, offer your waiting patients an mp3 player with a guided meditation they can follow or have your integrative therapist offer Reiki or a guided meditation before and during their treatment. Your patients will quickly recognize that you and your practice want to treat their well-being as well as their cancer.

What inspires you every day?

Where there's a problem, there's a solution. That inspires me. My passion is changing the health care system, so I get really inspired when I hear success stories of survivors who find their own way to integrate their healthcare. I get inspired at Urban Zen on a daily basis and observing the therapists and patients at Beth Israel is profoundly inspiring. And, I am always inspired by the wisdom of cultures.

Wendy Wegner is editor of *SU2C Mag*.