

Kirsten Grove

A Helping Hand

At five years old, Kirsten Grove's hands were small, but when she slipped them into the hands of patients in Baltimore's inner-city hospital, she began to learn they had great power. Her mother, a University of Pennsylvania nursing graduate with a stellar academic record, started working as a nurse once Kirsten, her youngest, started kindergarten. Her heart led her to the low-income patients of Baltimore. On holidays, she brought her children in to brighten the loneliest rooms. "We'd bring in gifts for the patients, hold their hands, and sing them carols," Kirsten recalls. "Just visiting with them and talking with them had a strong impact on me. Their expression of appreciation with a squeeze of their hand provided a feeling of healing that never left me."

It was one of the greatest lessons Kirsten's mother could have shared, and now forms the foundation of her holistic chiropractic practice. Nominated by her peers in 2013 as one of the top chiropractors in Virginia, and as the founder, President, and Clinical Director of Grove Spine & Sports Care, Kirsten's work revolves around tenets that are as essential as they are simple: stop, listen, and care. "Often, people will come to us after seeing half a dozen other providers, feeling that nobody's listened to them or taken the time to figure out what's wrong," she says. "I love diving into problems and sorting them out, considering all components of the body to find a solution that works. And on the occasions when we find we can't help someone, we actually figure out the path they should pursue to heal. We never leave a person hanging in limbo."

Through chiropractic school and during her first several years in practice, Kirsten sat down with patients and spent upwards of an hour taking their medical history and listening to concerns. Her core principles were in opposition to the warnings she was given, as she was told time and

again by doctors in the field that she'd never make any money if she kept focusing on quality time over volume. She respectfully disagreed, however, and believed so much in her approach that she decided to launch Grove Spine & Sports Care as a sole practitioner in 1998. "Amazingly, I didn't have any fear," she recounts. "I just knew in my heart it was what I needed to do in order to help patients heal. In order to provide the kind of care I had envisioned, I'd have to do it on my own, and I enjoyed that independence."

In the beginning, she rented space three days a week and spent the rest of her time doing vacation coverage for other doctors. With over \$100,000 in student loan debt from graduate school, banks wouldn't give her any further loans, so she figured out how to start her business from scratch. Fortunately, it was a feat that her thorough, inquisitive nature had been preparing her for all her life. "Some of my teachers in school were very old-school doctors who would expand their teachings if you came in

during lunchtime, so I used to go in as often as I could," she recalls. "They told me to keep my overhead low, and I focused on that from day one. For the first three years, I handled everything on my own—the insurance, the scheduling, the phones. It was a pragmatic choice that worked very well."

When word got out that Kirsten had started her own practice, many of her previous patients sought her out. She made a point to network, getting involved with the Chamber of Commerce and Business Networking International while connecting with the personal trainers at a gym nearby. "I didn't do much external marketing at the time," she remarks. "I tried a few things, but they didn't feel authentic or true to my personality. Some people would tell me, 'Look, sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do to get people in the door—that's just business.' But that



didn't sit right with me, so I stuck with my beliefs, focusing on face-to-face networking and building my practice through genuine relationships and word-of-mouth."

Staying true to her values turned into a two-year test of faith as she watched her resources dwindle and tuned out the naysayers who told her she was wrong. She was down to her last thousand dollars when, finally, all her efforts converged and began to pay off and she got very busy, very fast.

Kirsten's first employee was Helen, a 72-year-old firecracker who covered the front desk part-time for the next five years. "She reminded me of my grandmother—a very independent Midwesterner with a good heart and soul who always looked out for me," Kirsten recalls. "Patients would joke that she was my gatekeeper. She really helped me keep track of the finances of the business as I spent more time with patients."

As the practice continued to grow, Kirsten brought in an independent practitioner. When she moved the business to a nicer location in Tysons Corner, Virginia, she brought on several more associate practitioners, private practitioners, doctors of chiropractic, and physical therapists. "It's very important to me to have employees whose hearts are in the right place, and who want the best for our patients," she says. "Our focus is on getting people back to their health as quickly as possible, and then teaching them how to take care of themselves so they can be self-sufficient and independent stewards of their own wellness."

While each patient has different needs and healing trajectories, the average number of visits per case is five. And while a typical chiropractic office focuses only on spinal adjustments, Grove Spine & Sports Care also takes a lens to the muscles, connective tissue, and other elements that come into play. "Your joints don't work independently of your muscles, ligaments, tendons, and nerves," Kirsten explains. "When people have injuries like back pain, herniated disks, or tendonitis, we look globally at how everything functions in tandem. Putting all these pieces together helps speed up the healing process, which is my goal. I love seeing my patients, but I'm always eager for them to regain functionality and be on with their lives, happy and doing whatever they love to do—whether it's hiking or bungee jumping or hanging out with their families."

Kirsten accomplishes this goal by making

sure her skills are varied and honed. Three hundred hours of extensive post-graduate certified chiropractic sports physician work earned her a diplomate certification, which is currently held by only six other practitioners in the state of Virginia. "As diplomates, we're held to a higher standard because we've had so much additional education," she explains. "Focusing on sports injuries, the certification prepares us for excellence in working with a variety of sports teams, medical treatment teams, and race settings. As an example, we served as the medical team working the Ragnar 24-hour relay run race from Cumberland to National Harbor in September of 2014." Kirsten also takes a minimum of 30 continuing credit hours a year, stays current on the most cutting edge ideas in the field, and makes sure her team has a wide range of specializations and credentials. "Everyone's body works differently, with a unique set of connections and wiring," she says. "No one technique works the same for every condition, so the more tools you have in your toolbox, the greater your ability to fix people."

A patient once joked that Kirsten's profession reflects a perfect blend of her mother, who was a nurse, and her father, who was an engineer. Growing up in Ellicott City, Maryland, as the youngest of four, Kirsten certainly picked up her father's analytical skills and her mother's empathy and insatiable love of learning. "Patients often observe that I focus on the mechanics of the body quite a bit," she remarks. "To me, it's a beautiful machine, and I'm trying to restore optimal function. With a focus on empathy and healing, I consider myself a body engineer."

As a child, Kirsten spent summers with extended family in Pennsylvania. Her mother's parents from Germany were passionate about music, gardening, religion, and education, while her father's parents modeled incredible industriousness and strength of character. "My paternal grandmother didn't have education past high school, but I always believed she could have been the CEO of a company if she had been born in a different era," Kirsten remembers. "She ran her home and family of seven children like a CEO. She was stern at times, but her love was unconditional. If you screwed up, she would let you know, but she always had open arms. On my dresser at home now, I have a glass tray that was hers. It reminds me of her every morning, of who she was—a very strong woman who represents a lot of the good

qualities I try to bring to my practice today.”

Kirsten lost both grandfathers by the age of six, but thanks to all the time she spent with her family, she has strong memories of the many colorful personalities within her extended family that stuck together even if they didn’t always get along. She also has vivid memories of her mother, an accomplished pianist who declined an invitation to the Curtis Institute of Music to become a nurse. When she started working full time, she taught Kirsten and her siblings how to cook, leading them in ambitious projects to master the art of making sourdough pancakes, blueberry jam, and molasses taffy. She also loved to take the Grove children hiking, arming them with nature identification books and trash bags so they could help clean the trails as they went.

When Kirsten was 14 years old, the harmony in her life suddenly changed. Her mother passed away unexpectedly at the age of 42, transforming the Grove family forever. “Even though it was an extremely difficult time, I believe those kinds of events either bring families closer or tear them apart,” Kirsten says. “It brought my brothers and I much closer. I believe that positives come out of every negative, even if you can’t see them right away. In hindsight, I see there was a lot of confidence building that came from knowing that, when things get really difficult, I can still move forward.”

Indeed, Kirsten didn’t crumble or break apart—a success she credits to her wonderful family and friends who helped along the way. She started working as a babysitter and pet sitter, and then got a job at a fast food restaurant. “It taught me what I wanted and didn’t want from a job,” she recalls.

Upon graduating from high school, Kirsten enrolled in the University of Maryland at College Park with the intent of becoming a veterinarian. “But then I realized I didn’t like the idea of having to euthanize animals,” she says. “Everyone told me I should work with people, so I switched my focus to physical therapy. I needed to work about 20 hours a week to support myself, so I started working in a hospital physical therapy department and at a sports fitness physical therapy clinic as a PT Tech.”

After three semesters, Kirsten’s financial situation changed, so she transferred to the University of Maryland’s Baltimore County Campus and kept up to three jobs at a time to

cover her own tuition. At the hospital, she served a wide mix of people that included diabetics, paraplegics, burn victims, and drug addicts. At the sports fitness clinic, she worked on a cohesive team of wonderful people in a full rehab environment, mastering the various techniques until she was writing patient rehab programs. She loved the work but noted that the field of physical therapy was somewhat limited by the specific referrals and instructions of medical doctors. When a friend started Chiropractic College and proclaimed it was right up Kirsten’s alley, she investigated and ultimately agreed. “It’s not a field that’s well-understood,” she concedes. “It needs to work on its PR. I knew I would meet some resistance by choosing it, but I’m a free thinker, and I wasn’t concerned—I knew it was right for me.”

Kirsten enrolled in Chiropractic College at Northwestern Health Sciences University in Minnesota at age 26 with a unique base of hands-on experience that prepared her to begin her training on day one. With a focus on joints, neurology, radiology, and nutrition, the med school curriculum focused on health and wellness without the use of drugs as part of their practice. And for the first time in her life, Kirsten was on her own, responsible only for herself. “I was so cold that I had to wear two sets of leggings and jeans just to stay warm through my first winter there, but it felt so right,” she recalls. “It ushered me into a new age of autonomy—not only in my personal life, but in my practice as well. In this field, you can design your practice however you choose.”

Kirsten chose to build Grove Spine & Sports Care into a patient-centered practice that encourages her staff to think freely, just as she does. “When you build a business from scratch, you know it inside and out, and you’re tempted to give all of your answers,” she explains. “But I’m learning that it’s important to provide the outline, and let others fill in the blanks as they see them. Asking ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions helps people feel more part of the process, so I try to focus on doing that.” Through it all, her husband, Franz, has been her biggest supporter, a trusted confidant and honest sounding board.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Kirsten underscores the importance of regaining the natural curiosity of one’s younger years. “Investigate what you’re doing and think outside the lines,” she urges.

“When I interview someone and ask if they have any questions for me, it’s a red flag to me if someone says no. I want to see that people are doing things for the love of them, and that they’ve thought about it. I want to see them think creatively and get outside of their comfort zone.”

Kirsten, herself, was so famous for her own relentless questioning that her friends in school gave her a shirt with “WHY?” scripted across the front. It’s a question that can convey so much more than it inquires, belonging to those with the courage to reach beneath the surface and consider alternate possibilities. Thanks to this question, hers, are the hands examining the details of a musculoskeletal injury until the problem is fixed. “The path is not always clear-cut,” she acknowledges. “But a key part of treatment and healing is showing that you care. Diagnostic skills are important, but you have to develop those people skills. That means spending time with people—genuine time, like holding that sick

person’s hand when you’re five and seeing how it makes a difference.”

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