The best of both worlds: The AIAM story
by Christa Sidman

If you get the flu, you go to your regular doctor. But if you throw out your back or need help to quit smoking, you might see a massage therapist or acupuncturist. Here in Columbus, there’s an innovative school that trains health professionals in both Eastern and Western ways, and it’s a testament to the two strong women who founded it.

Flash back more than 20 years. Helen Yee, an internationally renowned martial artist, was living in Columbus with Diane Sater, an engineer who had worked at IBM. The experience of getting a sports massage inspired Helen to start studying and practicing massage. Diane followed suit, and in 1990, the two women opened their own clinic.

It didn’t take long for Massage Away, Inc. to become central Ohio’s largest therapeutic clinic. But finding qualified staff members was a chore. “Most of the massage therapists I saw lacked discipline, business sense or a strong ethical foundation,” Helen recalls. “Many had been taught to give the same massage to every client every time.” The solution was clear: open a school to train the kind of employee they wanted to hire. The Massage Away, Inc. School of Therapy was born.

“We encourage creativity, and we treat every client as an individual,” says Helen. “We tailor treatments to fit their needs each time they come in.” Students also learned how to manage their business and build strong client relationships. Because of the school’s high admissions standards, employers competed fiercely for graduates.

As their business prospered, Diane and Helen sought ways to make it better. In 2001, they studied at China’s Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. The experience inspired them to add Eastern medical philosophies and practices to their curriculum.

Diane explains, “Western medicine focuses on treating symptoms. Chinese medicine looks at the whole person, including emotional and mental as well as physical aspects.”

Attitudes toward health care have shifted over the past 20 years. “Now,” Helen notes, “more and more people are open to alternative health care. They don’t think ‘massage parlor’ when they hear ‘massage therapist.’ And they don’t just turn to acupuncture as a last resort.”

Today, their school – renamed the American Institute of Alternative Medicine, or AIAM – offers four different programs: massage, acupuncture, medical assisting and nursing. It’s a distinctive curriculum. The medical assisting program teaches both front-office and back-office skills. “Our acupuncture and acupressure programs both have medical components,” Diane says proudly. “And our holistic nursing program is one of only four in the country.”

More than 1,300 AIAM alumni are already practicing massage and/or acupuncture in the United States, the Virgin Islands and Europe. As the industry continues to evolve, AIAM will make sure its graduates remain on the cutting edge. For example, it is not yet legal to practice Chinese herbal medicine in Ohio. But if the law should change, AIAM will add the discipline to its program offerings.

It takes hard work and vision to keep AIAM and its students moving in the right direction. As CFO, Helen manages the school’s day-to-day operations, including its finances. And as the “big-picture” thinker, CEO Diane focuses on strategy, legal and accreditation issues.

“Diane and I have opposite strengths, and we respect each other for them,” says Helen. Diane agrees, adding, “There are 100,000 different aspects to running a business, and you have to make sure they’re all handled well. But one person can’t do everything. It takes a lot of different minds, talents and approaches to make it all work.”

Shared commitment is the glue that holds AIAM and its founders together. As Helen says, “We care passionately about our industry. And since we’re therapists in our own right, we are what we teach.”

For more information on AIAM, call 614.825.0255 or visit www.aiam.edu.