

This Month:

Therapist, Activist, Visionary: Sandy Aquila

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September/October

Heartland Healing



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Why Is Sting So Relaxed?





Bringing It All Back Om

Therapist, Activist, Artist, Avant Garde — Sandy Aquila has left a signature in the healing arts community (and in a secret location under the floor)

by Michael Braunstein

Sandy Aquila rarely misses the opportunity to let the obvious speak with irony or let levity grace a moment of challenge. One such pivotal instant of clarity from 1986 tells the story well.

Ms. Aquila was leading a group of people working to change the law in Nebraska that defined the profession of massage therapy. The problem was that licensed professionals, even after completing extensive formal training to deliver therapeutic massage, were forbidden by the state of Nebraska to describe what they did as “therapy” or call themselves “therapists.” This seemingly absurd predicament screamed out for change and Aquila was immersed in the arduous process of changing the law.

At a crucial moment when it seemed that state senators were going to bow to pressure from opposition groups and keep

massage therapy from becoming a reality in Nebraska, inspiration came to Sandy’s mission.

The opposition’s position was that the word “therapy” was sacrosanct and should be limited to use by medical professionals or those immediately supervised by doctors. It looked like massage therapists in Nebraska were going to be forced to call themselves nothing more than masseurs or masseuses.

Sandy’s group had prepared their final argument to present to the legislative committee.

Massage therapist Steve Abraham, now a psychotherapist in Omaha, was

the spokesperson partnered with Aquila in the petition process. Both of them had made the trip to Lincoln several times pleading the case.

“Sandy and I sat in front of that old 1986 Apple computer brainstorming. We made a 500-page booklet with tons of research. And remember, there was no internet making it easy then,” reported Abraham.

What happened next was brilliant. Sandy bought little tubes of Vaseline Lip Therapy at the drugstore. The next morning, each senator received that bulleted, outlined, highlighted research document with a small tube of Vaseline Lip Therapy attached. Tacked to it was a note: “Other people use the word therapy. Why can’t we? It’s just a word.”

“Sandy’s incredibly bright and she thinks of things through humor,” said Abraham. “She does have an excellent sense of irony. The Lip Therapy thing would never have worked without her sense of irony.”

The result? Today, we call them massage *therapists*.

The name Sandy Aquila has become almost synonymous with the term alternative therapies in Omaha. Since opening the Omaha Healing Arts Center in the Old Market, there is now a place to go with the face. And with the Center, it is obvious there is more to explore than healing therapies or modalities. There is a way of looking at life with a little more depth.

There have been many who have been at the forefront of the changing attitudes of enlightenment in Omaha. Few have held such a position of respect. That may be because few have so consistently pushed the envelope in expanding Omaha’s awareness.

Susie Gillespie Amendola, founder of the Omaha Yoga and Bodywork Center, has been a close friend of Aquila’s for 20 years.



Sandy Aquila, Licensed Massage *Therapist*

“Sandy holds a big space for individual *and* community evolution of consciousness,” Amendola said. “I think she feels that each of us is divine and there is potential in bringing that consciousness to community. That’s the kind of community she wants to live in so she is actively creating that kind of community.”

“In the 1980s, there were few people in the alternative healing community here and Sandy was always at the forefront of anything that would open public awareness to something different.”

Typical was when she organized events around a New Age event called the Harmonic Convergence back in 1987. A television interview at that time reveals a well-spoken Aquila explaining seemingly mystical happenings in an intelligent and grounded way such that even a skeptical television reporter felt embraced by ideas that some would find challenging.

Making people feel comfortable with possibilities of expanded awareness seems

to be one of Aquila’s notable talents. With her mother, Natalie Goodkind, as partner, Aquila opened the OM Center in 2001.

“Here’s an example of how deep and how detailed she is,” described Amendola. “When she remodeled the Emporium Building to create the Healing Arts Center, she was laying down this beautiful wood floor. Well, she called in spiritual people from various traditions and invited them to write something from their tradition on the base before she covered it.

“There are prayers written there from people in our community who hold a place for a certain kind of healing art. She had yogis, the priest from the Zen Center, Tibetan Monks and others come in and write something and then she covered it up with this beautiful cherry wood flooring. That’s brilliant. Who would think of such a detail? And so honoring and respectful of the healing community; because she wanted everyone to feel like it was their center, too. To this day, she has people sign the bricks on the wall when they come to the Center.”

“**Activist**” is just a word

Aquila would never call herself an “activist.” The very word suggests the notion of combativeness and confrontation. Her style is anything but that. She had spent two years in Gainesville, Fla. with her young son Cory, during which she studied to become a massage therapist.

Three years after returning to Omaha to practice, she found herself championing the elevation of the licensing of massage therapy in Nebraska to a level of respect in keeping with its profession. That would require a new state law.

Though the work was hard and every detail, including hiring lobbyists and meeting with state senators, was demanding, it was the tenor of the tactics that is most impressive. Aquila brings people together.

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“Sandy and I had an excellent relationship with our opponents. We would even appear on news shows with them,” observed Abraham. “Afterwards, the moderator would express surprise at how we respected each others’ viewpoints and were friendly. Our opposing points and distinctions were clear but there was no attacking.”

That style seemed to work just fine in getting the massage therapy law passed as Abraham described.

“The physical therapists opposing us pointed out that they had to have continuing education and massage should, too. Well, we agreed with them.

“Our opponents said, ‘We want you to have more training.’ We didn’t argue with that, either. They said ‘We want you to have continuing education requirements.’ We didn’t argue with that.

“They said, ‘We want you to give up the apprenticeship loophole.’ We didn’t argue with that. They said, ‘We want you to require legitimate schools for training.’ We didn’t argue with that.

“Though we wanted those points to elevate the credibility of the profession, if we had brought them up, our people would likely have been angered. So we let our opponents sort of build our profession exactly the way we wanted it.”

Did it make a difference? In 1986, there were 17 massage license applications. The projected number in 2004 is nearly ten times that.

She put the “therapy” in massage therapy and now the “art” in healing arts.

Bringing people together is a knack Sandy Aquila demonstrated early on.

“In high school, she was into social activities,” said Sandy’s mother. She had all kinds of friends, all the time.



TRAVELS WITH STING

Answering a call to attend to a weary international traveler in 1988. Sandy Aquila, licensed massage therapist, found herself backstage at the Civic Auditorium. It seems that night’s entertainment needed a little something to unwind.

Gordon Sumner, also known as Sting, was in the middle of a United States tour. He requested a massage before the show and the promoter knew of one therapist in particular.

Thus began a therapeutic relationship between Sting and Ms. Aquila that has lasted to this day.

Ms. Aquila went on to tour with Sting as his personal massage therapist during the four months of his European tour that year and has worked with him on nearly every occasion he has had to tour America.

After a July show in Kansas City, Sting was asked about Aquila’s work and if he was surprised to find such talent in Omaha.

“Sandy is an extremely talented therapist. When we met, I was deeply affected by her work so I brought her on tour,” Sting replied. “It didn’t cross my mind where she was from. I came from a much more backwater area than Omaha.”

They were always coming over. She was just a very sociable person. She makes friends easily. That’s the way she was as a little girl. She always loved people. That’s just the way she was born. It’s in her makeup.”

In 1999, when it came time to once again help the Nebraska legislature with state law, Aquila brought some more of her friends together. Together

they formed the Nebraska Oriental Medicine Association. The non-profit corporation was meant to help bring Nebraska into line with 37 other states that had laws licensing acupuncture. Meeting at Aquila’s home, the group laid out a strategy to make sure that qualified acupuncturists would become more accessible to Nebraskans. At the time of the group’s formation,

Nebraska had no statute for licensing acupuncture.

This time, attorney Sheldon Lebron joined the process as legal front man.

“Sandy played a primary role with the adoption of the acupuncture bill,” said Lebron from his home in Kentucky. “She’s such an amazing organizer and networker. Several times she brought in Barbara Mitchell, Director of the National Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance. Mitchell even stayed at Sandy’s house while she was testifying in Lincoln for the bill.

“Sandy just knows everybody,” Lebron insisted. “If she were in Hollywood, she’d be working for CAA as their number one agent. [Creative Artists Agency, tops in L.A. represents the likes of Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts.] That makes a lot of difference when you’re that well-connected.

“There were a number of times when we were making presentations to various sectors of the alternative health community and she was vital in drawing that all together. She was an indispensable force in that campaign and it would have been very, very difficult to do it without her expertise.”

As with the massage bill, the acupuncture bill was passed and signed into law. It was this essential piece of legislation that makes it possible for Nebraskans to have the medical care options available that we do today. It was simply a case of Aquila seeing another need and galvanizing a group toward action.

“Sandy’s definitely a thought leader,” continued Lebron. “She’s a person willing to think ahead of everyone else and also willing to *act* ahead of everyone else and make commitments. The Healing Arts Center is an example of that. I was at that first meeting when she got everyone together and she acted upon it. A lot of people are



Harmonically converging in Memorial Park, August, 1987, Aquila explains cosmic oneness in a television interview

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thought leaders but they don’t act upon it. She is one of those rare combinations of a progressive thinker who is also a progressive actor.”

It’s not surprising that Aquila’s forte is bringing people together. She has

been a holistic therapist for over 20 years. Her style is integrative. When that is combined with a love of the arts and a creative talent, bringing opportunities for Omaha to join with cultures, healing modalities, thought provoking ideas and chances to learn more about the Self becomes a natural extension of who she is.

Aquila takes joy in surrounding herself with opportunities to learn more about her own journey. The result is fun for anyone who takes in some of the events that come to the OM Center.

Statewide, every time a massage *therapy* license is issued, every time a licensed acupuncturist takes a stab at helping someone, it’s a reminder that a little Lip Therapy goes a long, long way. 🌀