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Pat Korb article

Dr. Margaret “Pat” Korb sits in her welcoming, relaxed office with her signature smile on her face. She is surrounded by watercolors depicting nature, and thick books with titles such as “Wishcraft” and “Treating Yourself.”

Her open, friendly face is framed by choppy white hair, and she peers thoughtfully through rounded glasses. At 86 years old, Korb speaks in a knowing voice, often accompanied by a raucous laugh.

The director and co-founder of the Gestalt Center of Gainesville Inc. seems perfectly at ease in her informal office located in the center that she helped found 30 years ago. Since the center first opened its doors in 1976, Korb has helped about 15 to 20 clients weekly, totaling nearly 30,000 Gestalt sessions throughout the past 30 years. According to Korb, she spent years trying to find where she belonged.

“I never fit in anywhere until I got involved with Gestalt work,” Korb explained.

In 1935, 15-year-old Korb was admitted to a small liberal arts college in Iowa, and she received her undergraduate degree at 19. Since she was years younger than the other students, Korb felt alienated. Soon after graduation, Korb settled down with her then-husband, a public school counselor, and their two kids in California. Korb then proceeded to head a four person family for the next 30 years.

When her then-husband had the opportunity for a one year advanced job training program at the University of Florida, Korb and her family relocated to the South. Korb decided to re-enter academia, first getting her master’s in English and then her doctorate in Counselor Education at age 55. When her husband, 18-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son moved back to California, Korb made the difficult decision to stay behind and pursue her career. Korb said she had essentially dropped out of the family at that point, and she was finally able to do what she had wanted for years.

While working toward her Ph. D, Korb took a class in Gestalt therapy, and she was instantly drawn to it. Gestalt is a well-respected type of therapy that was developed in the 1940s. The term Gestalt is a German word meaning “a complete pattern or configuration.” Rather, Gestalt therapy is a holistic type of therapy that considers the thing, its environment and the relationship between the two. By trusting that each client possesses everything within himself or herself to be healthy, the Gestalt therapist observes and guides the client back to health. The client must recognize and complete his or her own “gestalt.”

Gestalt therapy, which is process-oriented, has no specific protocol. The therapist must let go of his or her own agenda, such as the desire to help. Korb liked that the therapy did not involve prescribed methodology, and she was able to use her intuition to help people overcome difficulties.

It wasn’t long before Korb began to co-lead groups in Gestalt therapy. Jerry Thompson, a therapist who integrates Gestalt therapy in his private practice, met Korb when he was a graduate student, and she was leading one of his groups. While Thompson had only studied theoretical counseling, he was impressed that Korb was leading such hands-on workshops.

“It was just a lot of give and take with real people with real problems,” Thompson said, “not just talking, but doing processes.”

Diane Farris, another graduate student who became interested in Gestalt, joined Korb, Thompson and others in living rooms, one another’s houses and wherever else they could find to practice Gestalt in the early 1970s. Thompson was inspired by Korb’s ability to encourage

individuals to be who they were, while reserving judgment and avoiding pretension and artificiality.

“She’s a very respectful person, and she’s not about pushing her agenda,” Thompson said. “There’s no guidebook; she’s very open-hearted, open-minded and there’s no pigeon-holing.”

In 1976, Korb and Farris opened the Gestalt Center of Gainesville Inc. and they began formally teaching Gestalt principles in a relaxed setting. As the building stands today, it is a wooden structure with a front lawn that looks like a garden from the 1970s. Flowers dot the lawn, and there is a fountain, a stone bench and a bird feeder. Tiny lights wrap around the ledge of the walkway, and wind chimes hang in the doorway. The peaceful ambience effectively captures and reflects the philosophy and teachings of Gestalt. Since the center was first established, the Gestalt theories taught by Korb have had a formal means of influencing individuals and institutions throughout Gainesville.

Josie Davenport, co-owner of the Florida School of Massage, uses Gestalt techniques in her joint career of bodywork and clinical social work. The counseling room where she has led support groups for over a decade smells of residual incense and has a picture of Korb laughing. Davenport met Korb in 1982, while she was taking an advanced course in structural integration, or deep tissue massage. Since Korb was friends with the previous owner, Lee Joseph, she was accustomed to visiting the school and teaching Gestalt principles to the students. Davenport learned Gestalt techniques from Korb during the next five years and officially became part of the Gestalt staff in 1987.

“She’s one of the best therapists that I have ever observed, if not the best,” said the soft-spoken Davenport, who described Korb as “sharply intelligent.”

Korb continues to visit the massage students every three to four months, and introduces each new class of students to Gestalt techniques. Davenport said Gestalt techniques have been incorporated into the method and philosophy of the Florida School of Massage. Both Gestalt therapy and massage therapy stress the importance of respectful, supportive contact that is not intrusive.

The Gestalt Center of Gainesville Inc. features a training program, which lasts about two years, in Gestalt therapy. The program targets both professionals and those trying to become licensed and has been around for about 10 years. Davenport is a graduate of the program, which teaches such concepts as radical respect and respecting resistance. Radical respect is about trusting a client to resolve his or her own issues, wherein the therapist must let go of his or her own agenda. Gestalt students also learn to respect resistance, which means that a therapist must not push a client to move forward when he or she is stuck on an issue. Instead, the therapist may ask, “What might happen if you did move forward?” In doing so, the therapist is staying in the present while still acknowledging the fear. Korb stresses the importance of being present centered, or the ability to avoid distractions when listening to a client.

“She realized a long time ago that all real living takes place in the present,” Thompson said of Korb.

Although she remains the leader of the group due to her expertise, Korb acts unlike a typical therapist in group therapy, Davenport said. She takes part in rounds, which is a time when group members share their feelings and experiences.

Davenport remembers a time in the 1970s, when she, Korb, and about 10 others went on a weekend Gestalt workshop. Korb, a soprano singer, is trained in classical music, but she would involve everyone else in singing folk songs, and popular music such as “Amazing Grace.” Although she was a trained singer, Korb sang along with the rest of the group.

Korb was born in the same month and year as Davenport's mother, but Korb's humility and candor have made Davenport shy away from thinking of Korb as a mother figure, and she thinks of Korb more as a mentor and friend.

"She's more like a best friend," Davenport said. "I've always related to her in a way I couldn't with my mother."

Korb continues to work, train others and learn Gestalt therapy, with no end in sight.

"I really love what I do," Korb said. "I don't expect to retire."

Thompson said Korb sat on the floor early in her Gestalt career, which continued until about six years ago. Korb's relaxed, informal style reflected her desire to always be at ground level, he said. Only the physical limitations of age have made her start sitting in chairs. Thompson said that Korb is also losing her hearing at a mechanical level, but the physical limitations have not affected the quality of her counseling.

"She's probably still one of the best listeners around," Thompson said. "She is the person who gets the meaning much more profoundly. She hears the truth."