



SUCCESS STORY

Portland District Office

Cascade Acupuncture Center, LLC

Carola Stepper, RN & Licensed Acupuncturist

Carola Stepper, Registered Nurse and Licensed Acupuncturist, facilitates and operates a healthy acupuncture business in Hood River and The Dalles, Oregon. As owner and acupuncturist of Cascade Acupuncture Center, LLC, she brings a treasure of experience and passion that supports the growing need of natural health care in the Columbia River Gorge.

In her spare time she enjoys hiking, swimming, running, biking, windsurfing, snowboarding, skiing, and dancing. She has also been volunteering her time assisting with different community events as part of the Hood River County Chamber of Commerce Ambassadors since 2006.

Carola Stepper was born in New Jersey and raised in Germany, finally returning to the United States sixteen years ago. She lived both in Maui, Hawaii, and Portland, Oregon, before settling in Hood River, Oregon. Educated as a registered nurse in Germany in 1989, she has worked with hospitals both in Europe and the United States before changing her specialty to home health and hospice nursing.

Filling her thirst for continuous education and an alternative approach to health care led Carola to attend the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine in Portland, Oregon. She graduated in 2001 with a Master's in Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (MAcOM) and started to practice enthusiastically as a Licensed Acupuncturist (LAc). She did not have any business training and her parents were both employed in non-medical fields.

During the next five years, Carola worked as a part-time employee at the Celilo Cancer Center at Mid-Columbia Medical Center in The Dalles, Oregon, giving supportive acupuncture care to cancer patients undergoing chemo and radiation treatments. Cancer patients have been a focus for much of her career. Sighting the need for her learned skills in rural areas, Carola was able to contribute and build growing acupuncture practices in Portland, The Dalles, and Hood River, Oregon, and in Goldendale, Washington. She also maintained on-call positions as a nurse until her acupuncture practice was stable and manageable, at which point the focus shifted solely to her practices in Hood River and The Dalles, which are 20 miles apart.

Hood River has a population of approximately 6,000 with 10 licensed and practicing acupuncturists, and The Dalles has a population of approximately 20,000 with 2 licensed and practicing acupuncturists. In 2005, Carola expanded her Hood River practice by founding Cascade Acupuncture Center, LLC, renting her own clinic space and hiring her first office manager. This transition from working as an independent contractor to becoming an employer was her response to a sudden and unprofessional dissolution of a prior business relationship that left her without a business office or staff while continuing to run her business. At this time, she contacted the **SBDC** for business consulting as a first-time employer and business owner. One year after opening the Hood River clinic, Cascade Acupuncture opened their second location in The Dalles with the support of a business loan from the Mid-Columbia Economical Development Division. The decision to open a second clinic was her response to expanding her clinic in The Dalles by purchasing another acupuncturist's practice and unexpectedly losing the usage of the needed treatment rooms simultaneously. The time frame from deciding to open her second clinic to the first day of operations, which included finding the space, remodeling and furnishing it, hiring and training staff, was four months. During this time, another SBDC consultation included helping her write a business plan and acquiring a business loan. She has had other consultations over the years focusing on topics such as finances, planning, growth, staffing issues, and marketing.

Both clinics are warm and welcoming in part because the space utilizes Feng Shui principles, but also because the treatments are delivered in soft leather recliner chairs with soothing massage and heating pads. The specific set-up of this treatment room is Carola's invention. By consciously creating this unique environment, both staff and clients enjoy a comfortable and calming clinic setting. Both clinics are wheelchair accessible, sharing the same amount of treatment rooms, colors, décor and furniture.

Today, six years after graduating, she is providing acupuncture care to the people of the Mid-Columbia region together with a caring team of employees: three licensed acupuncturists, two office managers, and one marketing director. Statistically, only 15-20% of all acupuncturists are still in practice five years after graduation.

Both clinics accept insurance and offer an income-based sliding fee scale and 0% interest financing to aid in providing treatments to as many people as possible. Established clients can conveniently schedule themselves through their Web site, www.CascadeAcupuncture.org. The clinics are open six days a week and provide a full line of Chinese herbs and nutritional products to complement healthy living.

Cascade Acupuncture Center is a member of the following organizations: Hood River County Chamber of Commerce, Mount Adams Chamber of Commerce, Skamania County Chamber of Commerce, The Dalles Area Chamber of Commerce, and Hood River Downtown Business Association.

The practice is a general acupuncture practice with a focus in pain management. Cascade Acupuncture employs a unique and effective treatment style that involves insertion of fine, sterile needles only below the elbows and knees. This has proven to be highly effective in many areas of prevention and pain management.

Carola Stepper endeavors to be an exemplary acupuncturist, business woman, and employer. Two years after hiring her first staff person, her six employees receive paid vacation, matching retirement savings, health insurance and bonuses. She credits her success to her passion for acupuncture and resulting strong purpose to help as many people as possible to get well naturally, dedication, great team members, the vision of the team, great customer service, and effective treatments.

What makes this story unique is multifold: It is the story of a **woman-owned business** with no business background in an unusual professional field in a rural area that grew her business from hiring her first employee and opening her first clinic, to having six employees and two clinics within two years.

She had no outside funding except the loan for her second clinic which she paid off ahead of schedule. Both clinics are profitable and continue to grow steadily during her seventh year after graduation, when statistically only 15-20% of all acupuncturists are still in practice five years after graduation, and the majority of acupuncturists choose to practice without hiring staff.

She offers employment not only to office staff but also to acupuncturists which is a very unusual business model. Nationwide there are extremely few positions for acupuncturists offered to be employed, much less with benefits.

The following aspects of the clinics are rather uncommon compared to other acupuncture practices:

- They offer 0% interest financing as well as an income-based sliding fee scale.
- Clients can be seen in either clinic for increased convenience.
- Clients are able to schedule themselves through a link on the company Web site www.CascadeAcupuncture.org.

Clients can receive treatments either in an individual treatment room with a massage table or in a room with multiple leather recliner chairs with soothing massage and heat pads.

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