

Thanks to Her Dad...

By Todd Fiorentino

When Mr. Fiorentino asked his class at Mildred Elley why they wanted to pursue massage therapy, he received an unusual answer--"to honor my father," said Mary Baillargeon. Paul Baillargeon, Mary's father, served on the S.S. Mercedes out of Annapolis, Maryland as the Ship's Barber and, interestingly, Masseur. Although it sounds strange, it makes perfect sense. Imagine the heavy loads the sailors had to lift on a daily basis and the incredible strain on one's body from serving on a giant vessel like the Mercedes. Throwing out your back or muscle spasm was likely a regular occurrence.

Paul served in the Navy during WWII from 1943-1945. He sailed to Greece, China, Italy and other destinations for his country. Although the military seems like an unlikely outfit to hire massage therapists, they certainly had an interest in having their men in good physical condition. This is where massage comes in. Aside from easing muscle strain, massage and barbering also served a social aspect. These men were out at sea for long periods, away from their loved ones. Some were lonely, shell-shocked or claustrophobic. A haircut and a rubdown may have been the only hint of human connection in a time of war.

Paul went to the College of Swedish Massage at 41 Pearson Street in Chicago. He completed a correspondence course that included a practical exam. I had the privilege of viewing his old massage manual, which is truly a treasure. While massage has evolved and changed, this ancient book holds all of the fundamentals. Our current curriculum is still based on many of these ideas. Interestingly, it includes information about diet/digestion, baths (such as eucalyptus and Epsom salt), light therapy, sleep, blood pressure, talcs and tonics or ointments. It even tells how you can cup your hands and beat on someone's back to loosen phlegm.

Mary tells of how her father would rarely get sick and even when he did, it seemed he rebounded quickly. Mary has since graduated from Mildred Elley in Pittsfield though she still stays in touch with her instructor, Todd Fiorentino, who also lives in North Adams. She is a Certified Nurse Assistant at North Adams Regional Hospital and a Licensed Massage Therapist thanks to her own perseverance and, of course, thanks to her dad.

Mary Baillargeon is a practicing massage therapist in North Adams and may be reached at 413-664-4345.