

Jill Berkana

Jill Berkana, LMT, BCTMB, is the founder and director of the Berkana Institute of Massage Therapy and has practiced massage since 1990.



“Take risks—take calculated risks—and have courage. If you learn from all the challenging things that happen to you, this will ultimately support your ability to serve others.”

By Hannah Fell

When Jill Berkana lived in Boulder, Colorado, she was looking for a new career. She had just had a baby and lived down the street from the Boulder School of Massage Therapy. She enrolled in the massage school—but at the time, she didn’t realize the impact massage would have on her life.

“When I stumbled into massage therapy, it was a blessing because it was a great fit for my personality,” she said. “Massage therapy school really transformed me on such a deep level.”

Berkana said the college was holistic and looked not only at the process of learning the science and techniques of massage therapy, but also at how trauma can impact a person’s life and ability to thrive.

After she graduated massage school, she worked for a health club and then, following a lead provided by the college, took her massage skills to a seemingly unlikely place: Belize.

“I aggressively pursued the position,” Berkana said. “I was calling them and sending them faxes. And two weeks later I was sitting on my trunk going to Belize.”

There was a four-hour car ride into the jungle from the airport. “Suddenly, we [her and her son] are living in a little hut in the jungle with monkeys.” She was the massage

therapist for a resort and developed their spa program. She developed a holistic program and exercise plan and provided massage therapy for her clients.

“It was a great experience,” she said. “When I came back to the states I was devoted to my private practice and had one for 16 years.”

In 1995 Berkana got into a major auto accident and sustained a traumatic brain injury.

“The head injury resulted in the elimination of over-thinking a massage session,” she said. “I allowed the moment with the client to dictate what would happen in a session verses having an agenda.”

Over the years she developed this approach in practice. She calls this method Mindful Expressionism, and she teaches this at her massage school. “It isn’t a modality, but a philosophy and practice of staying mindful and present in the moment.”

Yet, Berkana always found herself longing to get back to the rainforest. Years later, in 2005, she decided to create the Costa Rica School of Massage Therapy. She built the curriculum and entire program along with the website.

By the time she arrived in Costa Rica

in June of 2006, she had a class of 14 students. They all met at the hotel she rented. She had six instructors and had her program approved by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork.

“It went great,” Berkana recalled. “I trained 187 students in 13 terms and built a huge campus on this pig farm in the jungle by the ocean.”

She sold the school in September of 2011, and moved back to the states to found and run the Berkana Institute of Massage Therapy in Longmont, Colorado. In total she has run her certification program 35 times and has 350 graduates worldwide.

In 2015 she was elected to serve as a director for the NCBTMB, and acted as board liaison for the Ethics and Standards Committee

Berkana said she wouldn’t change any of her experiences and is proud of all that she has accomplished.

“Take risks—take calculated risks—and have courage,” she said. “If you learn from all the challenging things that happen to you, this will ultimately support your ability to serve others.” **M**

Hannah Fell is *MASSAGE Magazine’s* associate editor.