

Booze Muse by Sarah Tuff

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The driver had just "a couple of beers" one evening last August in Hines-burg, but it was enough to cause a fatal accident with an oncoming pickup truck. Six days later in Jericho, after the equivalent of seven gin-and-tonics, a different driver caused a single-vehicle accident at three in the morning that killed his passenger.

Impairment may result from a little or a lot of drinking, depending on the individual. But either way, "30 to 40 percent of highway deaths per year are alcohol-related," says Steve Reckers, coordinator of alcohol traffic safety programs for the Governor's Highway Safety Program. "And it can happen anytime."

"Anytime" is mostly summertime, when people are more likely to be plastered on pi-a coladas, margaritas and the like. Reckers' department reports a big jump in alcohol-related traffic crashes and fatalities from Memorial Day through Labor Day. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, seven of the top-10 deadliest days on the road are in July and August. And while the overall number of people killed in U.S. crashes declined in 2004, Vermont's fatalities leapt 42 percent - the most dramatic increase in the nation.

Not all those deaths were due to drinking, but collectively they may be one reason a new alternative treatment center in Benson is causing a lot of buzz among alcoholics and "problem drinkers."

"I was drinking every day," says "Paula," a 47-year-old Montpelier lawyer. "I wasn't into heavy vodkas and stuff like that, but just too much. I knew it was only a matter of time before something would happen, like a car accident."

On the advice of a friend, Paula looked up the Lenair Technique Center, which relocated from Boston in late 2004. Operated by "medical intuitive" Rhonda Lenair and her husband Barry Chafin, the center treats alcohol dependency with "bioelectrical and electromagnetic modalities," according to the brochure. Though skeptical, Paula booked an appointment. "I knew I didn't want a 12-step program," she says. "For most people I know, it doesn't work, and it's not my thing to do a lot of talk therapy."

After an initial phone consultation with Chafin, Paula drove to Benson, where she spent 15 to 20 minutes with Lenair. They began by chatting, and Paula immediately noticed something peculiar. "She's almost looking through you, reading you," Paula says. Describing how Lenair conducted the "healing" process, she adds, "She'll put her hands on your forehead and put you through some visualizations: "Think about how it feels when you're really stressed and you have to have a drink' ... and then she says, 'OK, forget about that, and think about some relaxing ocean, waves and blue sky.'"

It sounds like hypnosis, but Paula explains that something different happened that day back in January. And when she walked out of the center, she felt like a new person, rid of the anxiety that had led her to drink. Paula hasn't had a drop of alcohol since. "I just don't feel like drinking at all," she reports.

Bioelectrics, according to its practitioners, is a practice based on the premise that all living things have frequencies like those associated with electronic circuits. "I detect and correct frequencies," says Lenair in a phone interview. "I allow the inside to be as available as the outside."

Lenair was studying ballet in 1972 when, at age 16, she met a doctor in England who told her she had an unusually strong electromagnetic field. She began studying under this doctor, and then spent a decade researching physiology, psychology, nutrition, math, physics, homeopathy and herbal medicine. Eventually, Lenair began using medical intuition to diagnose others' illnesses. At first she practiced on her poodle; she began seeing people in 1985.

In the 20 years since, according to Chafin, Lenair, now 49, has helped more than 30,000 people battle alcoholism and more. The Healing Center's list of programs also includes abuse and trauma; eating disorders; marijuana addiction; physical conditions; sexual disorders; smoking cessation; and "other addictions, disorders and related problems." There even have been treatments for nail biting and a sweet tooth. A series of three private sessions costs \$1865.

Lenair describes what she does as "ripping a problem out by its roots." The center's brochure seems to back this up, with nearly 60 testimonials from former clients, several of them in the medical community. Chafin says people come from as far as South Africa, New Zealand and Japan to meet with his wife, and that survey results indicate 95 percent of her clients have their problem "completely eliminated." Lenair's work has been called a marvel, a gift and a miracle. "It's as if I've been touched by an angel," one client claims in a testimonial that appears in the brochure.

She certainly sounds other-worldly, but also humble and concerned about helping

society. "I never think of it as a power," says Lenair. "It wasn't like I was hit by a bolt of lightning or anything."

Then what, exactly, does she do? "It's understanding that one affects all and all affect one," says Lenair, who says she never watches the clock during sessions with her clients - she sees four or five people per day. "Energetically, if I can take you by the hand and walk you across the footbridge that leads from the physical to the energetic, then you would understand that everything is in a state of neutrality."

Cynicism notwithstanding, it's hard to ignore a case such as "Jeff," a 42-year-old lumberyard worker and father of three from Poultney. He estimates he was drinking 40 to 50 ounces of liquor a day in the two years surrounding his divorce. Beers after work gave way to drinks in the morning before work, more at his favorite bar at lunch, and ensuing detox and recovery programs as well as several near-death experiences.

At one point, Jeff says he was driving to work, loaded, and decided he needed help. A friend found him near the emergency room of Rutland Regional Medical Center, passed out in his truck. His blood alcohol level was a death-defying .37. Later, after a snowmobiling accident left him with a broken back, Jeff began to add painkillers and ibuprofen to the mix. Another ER visit revealed that he had severe internal hemorrhaging, and he says the doctors told him he would die soon if he continued to drink and pop pills.

Jeff calls chiropractors "garbage" and horoscopes "crazy," but when his brother mentioned an article he had read about the Lenair Center, Jeff agreed to try it. He doesn't reveal much about what happened when he first went in late February, and struggles to find the words to describe Lenair. "I almost felt like there was something about her - her demeanor, her tone of voice," says Jeff, who adds that she brought him to a state of "normalcy" - to his pre-drinking days. "It was a weird feeling when I left, like a peace."

Afterwards, Jeff drove straight to his favorite bar, where he ordered lunch and a drink - iced tea. "I was there with all my demons, and I wasn't even tempted," he says, adding that his kids are even happier than he is about his recovery. "After my session, my daughter was in tears," Jeff recalls. "I said, 'I'm back.'"