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Ridley-Lowell Provides Education in Allied Health Professions

by MEG BARONE

While the roller coaster ride of the U.S. economy continues its upward climb and then harrowing dips and hairpin turns, one particular industry seems to be steaming ahead on a relatively even course.

Numerous experts have pointed out over the last three years that jobs in healthcare and wellness are generally recession-proof, and an aging Baby Boomer population will continue to create a demand.

One Connecticut school has taken note of the public's growing medical needs and interest in improved quality of life and has tailored the courses at one of its campuses to medical assisting and massage therapy. It was just last April that Ridley-Lowell Business & Technical Institute designated its Danbury campus as a site for training in medical and wellness careers, from which the first group of students will graduate this spring.

In that brief period of time, Lauren Weymouth has already brought her broader vision of the school to fruition. Weymouth envisioned an institute focused on training students in medical assisting and massage therapy but also of transforming the campus into a center that would help educate the public and make people aware of health and wellness issues.

"I not only wanted to build a campus with educational offerings, I wanted to create a wellness center, a hub in the community for all things related to health and wellness and holistic information," said Weymouth, whose parents, Terry and Norma Weymouth, have owned the Ridley-Lowell schools for the last 35 years. Ridley-Lowell Business & Technical Institute has a 160-year history and it includes campuses in Binghamton and Poughkeepsie, New York and New London, Conn., which provide career training for a wide range of professions and trades.

Lauren Weymouth's concept includes hosting lectures, providing career development opportunities for professionals already working in the field, and creating hand-on learning experiences for her existing students. She has already accomplished those goals.

"We have launched our student-run clinic, which welcomes the community

in for massages at a discounted rate so that the students have an opportunity to work on different bodies and perfect their skills," Weymouth said. Students work on clients under the supervision of licensed massage therapists and instructors. Day and evening hours are available.

The student-run, in-house clinic on campus provides students in training with a real spa or clinic setting. They get to experience in-take of clients, the setting up and breaking down of equipment, and conducting the massages. Weymouth said Ridley-Lowell is also providing off-site experiences for students to make sure they have a well-rounded educational experience that exposes them to the various applications for massage including sports, medical and spa.

"We're very busy scheduling our students at sporting events and we're building relationships with cancer clinics and nursing homes and corporations," Weymouth said. "At a race they can be massaging people before they race for warm-up and injury prevention, and again post racing," she said. Offering massages to cancer patients pre-surgery or pre-chemotherapy treatments will allow them to relax their body, Weymouth said.

"We're in the process of building those relationships," said Weymouth, who invites calls from sporting event organizers, coaches of local athletic teams, cancer clinics, nursing and convalescent homes and businesses to schedule off-

campus massage clinics for their athletes, patients or employees.

"The American Association of Massage Therapy is working to educate the country on all the benefits of massage. It shouldn't just be a luxury. It should be affordable and accessible to everyone as preventative medicine. Stress tends to be one of the highest causes of so many illnesses and ailments," Weymouth said. Relieving that stress, releasing tension and getting your blood flowing more can lead to better health and better quality of life, she said.

It's a win-win situation, really. The workplace can be stressful so, getting a relaxing massage at work reduces the level of stress and allows a company's employees to be more productive. At the same time the Ridley-Lowell students are perfecting their massage technique, Weymouth said.

"In addition, we're started launching Ridley-Lowell as a provider of continuing education credits for already licensed massage therapists in the area," Weymouth said. "Previously, LMTs would have to go down to New York City for continuing education classes that they need in order to keep up their licensure, to keep up with the industry or to learn new modalities. Now they can come to Ridley-Lowell," she said.

This spring, Ridley-Lowell will offer a weekend workshop that will provide 16 continuing education credits with Dr. Joe Muscolino, a licensed chiropractic physician, as the guest lecturer. The workshop, titled Clinical Orthopedic Massage Techniques for the Neck, will be held April 9 and 10, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and has a fee of \$320 per person.



"We have also partnered with the Institute of Kinesiology in New York City to do continuing education credits as well," Weymouth said. One such workshop in the planning stages will deal with pain relief.

Ridley-Lowell is also offering workshops to the general public. On Wednesday, March 30, 6:30 to 9 p.m., the institute will offer a workshop on emotional intelligence, or EQ, with Sharona Fein. This workshop is titled Exploring Skills to Increase Four Essential Areas: Self Awareness, Self Management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management. There is a \$45 fee per person.

Weymouth's vision has brought to the school another program, which was specifically designed to target those people who participated in other schools' massage therapy programs but now feel the need for tutoring to get up to speed, and people who never sat for their exam and now want help with exam preparation. Ridley-Lowell has put together an exam prep course to address those needs.

"We're still new and growing, and we're reaching out to the community," Weymouth said. And it's a two-way street, she said. Weymouth and her staff invite regional massage therapists and speakers from the medical and wellness field to contact them about coming to the institute to talk with students about their profession or to serve as guest lecturers at events and workshops hosted by Ridley-Lowell.

She is also lining up spas, medical clinics and other facilities that would be willing to allow Ridley-Lowell students to visit on a field trip.

"We're looking to build our programs and create relationships with other professionals to benefit everyone," Weymouth said.

Ridley-Lowell's medical assisting students also get hands-on training. The current group of students, who will graduate later this spring, is involved in externships. They are working in the field in private physician practices and at hospitals.

The aging Baby Boomer population coupled with the government's push to transpose all medical records to digital form is increasing the need for medical assistants. Allied health is probably one of the top five fastest growing fields.

"The U.S. Department of Labor keeps releasing information about the fact that medical assisting is the fastest growing allied health career. If you open the job section every week there's a need as indicated by the help wanted ads for medical assistants," Weymouth said.

"This field of medical assisting is so robust. It's amazing in this economy that there are so many jobs available that our students are being called on before they even graduate. It's really positive," Weymouth said. She added that the students cannot be placed in those jobs until they have graduated. The school also encourages them to sit for a national exam, which, if they pass, gives them the designation of certified medical assist.

The same applies to Ridley-Lowell's massage therapy students. "They sit for their national licensure, which is a distinction of being professional," Weymouth said.

Weymouth said Ridley-Lowell Business & Technical Institute is ideal for a wide range of students. "We re-train people for new careers. We also train people for first time careers. We have a diverse student body; people coming in right out of high school or after getting their GED who know what they want to do. And we have another segment of the population that comes to Ridley-Lowell for re-training to launch a new career," she said. "They want to get into the healthcare industry because they hear they are more sustainable jobs," she said.

Ridley-Lowell is currently enrolling students for its spring day and evening classes in medical assisting and massage therapy. Day classes launch on April 4 and evening classes on May 9. Classes are open to all interested students, who must be at least 17 years old and have a high school diploma or GED. Financial assistance is available for qualified students. One qualification is U.S. citizenship.

Weymouth said Ridley-Lowell provides a very supportive environment for its students. "We have a class called Career Development in all the programs we offer, where they learn resume-building skills, and they do mock interviews and work on their professionalism," she said. She said that class includes guest speakers from Human Resource departments of medical facilities and businesses. Students also go on field trips.

"Graduates can come back at any time to any campus for placement assistance, for lifetime refresher courses, for help getting a new job. We'll help them rebuild their resume. If they want help with improving interviewing skills they can come in and mock with a placement guidance counselor," Weymouth said.

Massages at Ridley-Lowell's student-operated clinic are offered by appointment only. To book an appointment or to learn more about the courses available or to enroll in classes at Ridley-Lowell Business & Technical Institute's Danbury campus, 24 Shelter Rock Road, call the school at 203-797-0551 or visit the website at www.ridley.edu.

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