

## Call to Action: The United Aromatherapy Effort.

By Sara Holmes, RA

When you talk with Sylla Sheppard-Hanger it is like visiting with your best friend. She is so humble about her talents, work ethic, and compassion that you forget you are talking to an Aromatherapy icon. Sheppard-Hanger created **The United Aromatherapy Effort** with her friend Doug E. Rasmussen, a Licensed Massage & Bodywork Therapist and Executive Director of the Emergency Response Massage International (ERMI). Rasmussen was Executive director of an earlier team, the Carolina Emergency Response Massage Team (CERMT), which travelled to New York City in 2001 after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center.

"The purpose of UAE is to collect and disseminate donated aromatherapy products through the emergency response massage teams ERMI and CERMT. Thus far, ERMI/CERMT's purpose is to provide a stress relieving 15 minute chair massages for relief workers responding to disasters and emergency efforts. It has been shown that these treatments offer the first responders a chance to become more relaxed and refreshed before their required debriefing; so post traumatic stress (PTS) is mitigated," says Sheppard-Hanger.

Sheppard-Hanger gives Rasmussen most of the credit for providing the United Aromatherapy Effort a venue for dissemination. "Without Doug E.'s previous work, the UAE would be less effective as this is how the products get to the first responders. She says, "He is an awesome guy!"

Rasmussen is a graduate of Sheppard-Hanger's Atlantic Institute of Aromatherapy and he and his wife were principal tutors of her Key West branch.

Sheppard-Hanger says, "Doug is really the one who started the ball rolling for massage therapists becoming involved in supporting rescue workers through massage therapy after the Oklahoma bombings. He helped form the first Florida team, then went on to form the Carolina team (CERMT) and now an international team, ERMI, that any therapist from any state or country can be a volunteer team member. Aromatherapy to enhance the relaxation experience for these heroes has always been a part of the one-day training for volunteers who learn the massage routine, aromatherapy introduction and some emergency management/incident management protocol."

Sheppard-Hanger says the idea to add donations to Rasmussen's work was one of those "creative insights" she sometimes gets during a massage with a client. The idea for the UAE came from one of those. After the massage, she immediately told Rasmussen she was joining the CERMT team, and that they were going to have aromatherapy to give out. She put the word out through the internet aromatherapy network. Sheppard-Hanger believes that without Kelly Holland Azzaro and NAHA's help the UAE effort would not have been as effective since they are primarily responsible for getting the initial word out for both 9/11 and the Gulf Coast disasters. The products poured in from people who knew they would take it where it was needed. The initial website, [www.unitedaromatherapy.org](http://www.unitedaromatherapy.org) was an early contribution which also helped get the word out.

Afterwards, one of Sheppard-Hanger's clients donated time to maintain it. The site allows for updates, pictures, and wish list of monetary and aromatherapy product donations.

### **Sheppard-Hanger shared some impressive statistics.**

"The UAE/CERMT team worked four separate deployments in NY, gave out over \$10,000 worth of aromatherapy and performed over 3,500 massages to FDNY, NYPD, PAPD, etc. at Ground Zero, the landfill, and fire stations all over the five Burroughs.

In addition, twenty-two fire stations were 'adopted' by the aromatherapy community and were

provided with diffusers, vaporizers and oils. It was only ten percent of the 'houses' in NYC but we hope we made a little difference.

Now in the Gulf Coast effort, ERMI has worked for four weeks in Mississippi and two weeks in Louisiana and CERMT has worked six weeks in MS with sixty therapists giving 2,500 massages!"

Sheppard-Hanger is quick to tell you how much this "contribution of a lifetime" meant to her personally and professionally.

"It is truly a life changing experience to volunteer for this type of work. It is a group effort and no matter what else I do, nothing will ever mean more to me than my work during 9/11 and now the Gulf coast effort. Giving and receiving are so powerful and it is such an awesome feeling."

### Interview with Sylla Sheppard-Hanger.

**Sara Holmes:** Reflecting on your most recent Gulf Coast trip, what aromatherapy blends did you find most useful?

**Sylla Sheppard-Hanger:** Well, I want everyone to know that we don't just set the aromatherapy donations out on a table and let people choose one. Each massage therapist or aromatherapist personally places a spray, roll-on, or inhaler in the hand of the intended user.

Almost all of the responders react positively and are thrilled with the aromatherapy! They will tell you that when they come in the building, they can tell we are here because it smells so wonderful. We try to address each responder's physical or emotional condition based on their individual needs if we have time and a product they can use. We have had several memorable experiences and one neat thing in Biloxi was when we asked if they had ever had massage or aromatherapy before many answered "yes," they saw us in NY!

Another incident I remember clearly was a lady who was having a terrible migraine headache. She had suffered with this headache for a couple of days and she was hoping the massage would help. I took out a peppermint/lavender spray that had been donated to us and that was exactly what this lady needed. She came back the next day totally amazed; said it helped her migraine immediately, she was able to sleep the first good night since her deployment. She was SO grateful for us! It almost brought me to tears to see this lady who had suffered for days find relief and leave the cubicle where we were working cheerful and pain free.

I also want to mention, that you (Sara) received feedback from a gentleman on the Disaster Mortuary Response Team DMORT) who had received a mosquito repellent blend that you and your Parkland College class had prepared and donated. It is so exciting to hear about someone successfully using aromatherapy as a first responder and sharing such positive feedback with you.

**SH:** What changes have you seen in the UAE since 2001?

**SSH:** I have learned so much since then. This work is emotionally addicting. You get an endorphin rush from helping people and so you don't realize how much the devastation and emotions are affecting you. Doug is excellent about scheduling us so we don't wear out; he monitors our body mechanics while we work, helping to prevent strains. Typically we are scheduled six hours a day max! We can only work one week on and three weeks off. After 9/11 I actually suffered post traumatic disorder (PTSD) because I overdid it physically, emotionally, spiritually and financially. It is easy to get caught up in the emotions without even realizing it. I worked hard to move through this. Now I am better prepared, and take care of myself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I also fund-raised for gas money before I go, instead of going into debt myself like I did in NY, racking up thousands of credit card bills to get myself and my daughter there to volunteer.

**SH:** What direction would you like to see the United Aromatherapy Effort go from here?

**SSH:** I have to tell you, we have come such a long way. After I spoke at the Aromatics in Action conference in Denver (October 2005) and the response to the ABMP website we had over 300 massage therapists and aromatherapists volunteer. Even though Doug trains each massage therapist to use aromatherapy in the field, I would like to see an aromatherapist assigned to each team. I would also like to have funds available so that we don't have to worry about the UAE's sustainability. We have had wonderful response to donations for supplies, but we always need cash for additional supplies, hotel rooms, meals, etc.

Right now we need inhalers to get into New Orleans. We have found that inhalers are one of the easiest and most effective ways to get the benefits of aromatherapy out there where they are needed. The results of combining aromatherapy and massage in this type of work are amazing. Together the two are unbeatable. I truly believe we are breaking new ground in aromatherapy. And the way it seems, the disasters are coming faster and closer together, so its important to get therapists trained in every state so locals can take care of their communities, and perhaps the UAE can supply products from here on out.

**SH:** What should someone reading this do if they would like to be involved?

**SSH:** They contact me via [www.AtlanticInstitute.com](http://www.AtlanticInstitute.com) if they would like to donate products or make a financial contribution. If you are a massage therapist and would like to volunteer on location, realize it is not a picnic, we sleep 10 to a room on cots in fire stations, and you may be uncomfortable. If you are a team player and can contribute support in a cooperative and helpful way please get in touch.

Whole sections of the coast of Mississippi were crushed along with Louisiana. We just finished in Gulfport/Biloxi, Baton Rouge and finally in New Orleans working with the Police Department. We start back up in January and hope to get local therapists to take over eventually. We hope to keep supplying some aromatherapy as long as we can. Anyone who wants to help should enlist the help of their family, friends and clients to support you to go. A client and friend bought my first ticket to New York. Everybody wants to help!

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