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Back in Bloom of Health

By Cathy Hainer

Hanukkah came early to my house this year, and I got the best present of all: a clean bill of health. One year ago I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. For six months I underwent treatment — chemotherapy and radiation. In early December, six months after treatment concluded, I had a bone and CT scan to show the current status of the disease.

Great news! The scans were clear. Exactly one year after diagnosis, I was officially declared NED: no evidence of disease.

This called for a celebration. So I gave myself two presents. First, I declared Dec. 17 VW Day, victory over the wig. After 10 months of wearing the hateful thing, I was finally ready to uncover my own hair.

I still consider myself follicularly challenged because my hair has come in like a baby's, wispy and sparse. Even worse, it's liberally sprinkled with gray. Still, there's a wonderful freedom in not having to pull on the hairy cap every time I answer the doorbell or run to the grocery store.

For my second present, I signed up for a week at the Optimum Health Institute (OHI) near Austin, Texas, to do a "cellular detox." I decided to rid my body of years' worth of built-up toxins by eating nothing but raw fruits and vegetables and drinking tons of wheatgrass juice. OK, it's not exactly a week in Paris, but I'd been interested in doing a detox program since I was first diagnosed, and after six months of chemotherapy, it was time to treat my body to a little TLC.

OHI's concept of alternative health education wouldn't be everyone's idea of TLC. The regimen, from fasting to colonics, might raise a few mainstream medical eyebrows, but I felt good about doing something good for my body.



Bathed in happiness:

USA TODAY reporter Cathy Hainer relaxes in a whirlpool at the Optimum Health Institute of Austin (USA TODAY).

Set in Texas' rolling hill country, OHI is not a treatment center, but an educational institute where people come to cleanse their bodies and to learn improved eating habits. At OHI, they believe that food can be your medicine.

"Our mission is to teach this way of health, based on a raw vegetarian diet with wheatgrass juice," says director Judith Connelly. "This program isn't a cure, but it gives the body what it needs to cure itself."

Every morning at 7:20 the bell rang, and all 10 of us guests gathered to do lymphatic drainage exercises, sort of calisthenics combined with yoga designed to drain the lymph nodes and push out toxins.

Then it was off to breakfast. There'd be big bowls of grapefruit, oranges or kiwi. One morning we each got a huge hunk of watermelon, along with the juiced rind. For lunch and dinner, we'd make a giant salad out of sliced raw peppers, cucumbers, sprouts and a concoction called seed cheese.

It was all raw, all the time, but we never went hungry. At least not until we started the juice fast. For three days, you consume nothing solid, only fruits and vegetables that have been put through a juicer. For breakfast we had juiced watermelon. It was sweet and delicious, and I drank three glasses.

But the lunchtime glass of juiced green vegetables had an unfortunate bile color. They say that one glass of vegetable juice is the equivalent of two plates of raw vegetables and perfectly nutritious. But it sure doesn't fill up the hole in your belly. By the second morning, I was craving solid food. Not the sweets I usually crave, but a big hunk of country bread and cheese. Something to chew on.



Veggies: *A popular OHI meal (USA TODAY).*

During the days, we attended classes on the digestive system, and I soon became fluent in the ABCs of the elimination system: 'A' stands for alimentary canal, which runs from the mouth to anus with the purpose of digesting and eliminating food; 'B' is for the bowels, or section of the intestines where residue from the digestive process is discharged; and 'C' is for colonics, a sort of interior high-powered car wash that cleans the colon.

Most people who eat the standard American "goo and glue" diet (as they call it at OHI) have about 5-10 pounds of matter stored in the colon. It's said that, according to the autopsy, John Wayne had 40 pounds of impacted fecal matter in his body at death. Elvis reportedly had 60 pounds.

So the good news is, OHI's program gets rid of this impacted matter. The bad

news is, they achieve this by doing daily enemas. Once each day, OHI campers would grab their bucket and give the old intestines a warm bath. My friend Mark has taken to calling OHI "Enemas 'R' Us."

"Enemas are not anyone's favorite pastime," Connelly says. But she explains their importance thus: "In a disordered colon, matter can putrefy and ferment and then leach back into the bloodstream. In effect, the body is poisoning itself, and this leads to disease."

After some initial jokes by embarrassed guests, enemas soon became the subject of polite dinner conversation.

Katina: "Gee, I felt so much better after I did an enema last night."

Mary: "My enema made me feel a little bloated."

Claire: "I brought my Walkman and listened to some tapes while I did my enema."

I realize this makes us OHI guests sound like a bunch of freakazoids. But in the institute's warm and supportive atmosphere, it's perfectly natural to inquire after your neighbor's bowels. "When I was young, people would never talk openly about sex, but they would freely discuss their colons. Now nobody talks about their colons, and people won't stop talking about sex," says OHI manager Russell Nees.

Along with the raw foods and daily cleansing, the third mainstay of Planet OHI is wheatgrass juice. It's considered a nearly perfect food, rich in nutrients, essential amino acids and major minerals. Twice a day, we'd head into the juicing room, put the slender green strands through the machine, and measure out 2 ounces of the green liquid. Wheatgrass juice tastes like, well, grass. It's surprisingly sweet and potent.

And it's considered nearly a magic elixir at OHI. They suggest using the juiced pulp in poultices by applying a wad directly to cuts, burns or blemishes. They recommend rubbing the juice on your face as a skin toner. Or using it as a shampoo to get rid of gray hairs.

Feeling game one afternoon, I gathered a handful of the mushy pulp and plopped it right on top of my



Down the hatch: *Hainer feeds wheatgrass into a special juicer (USA TODAY).*

head in the hopes of sprouting some new hair. I smelled like a cow and looked like a green-scalped Martian, so I stayed locked in my room for the half hour that I left the poultice on. But I swear, by the following week, my hair seemed fuller and longer. I'm a believer.

I had learned a lot at OHI. But as the Talmud says, "The teaching is not what counts. It is the doing that is important."

So I'm doing. I dug my juicer out from the back of a closet and found a local wheatgrass supplier, so I'm juicing at home. I'm not one who usually goes in for that annual exercise in folly called the New Year's resolution, but this year I have resolved to try to eat at least one raw food meal each day.

And I've resolved to follow other OHI advice, such as chew each bite 25-30 times; don't drink liquids with meals, wait until a half-hour afterward; and develop rituals around your meals to promote sacredness.

I think a lot about the sacredness of the everyday. Last January, after I was diagnosed, my fiancé, David, and I bought a peace lily. I lavished care and attention on that plant, believing that as it fared, so would I.

A year later, I'm glad to report that the lily is doing quite well, putting out new shoots even in the dead of winter. I, too, feel in the bloom of health and am putting out new shoots in my life. David and I are planning some renovations on our house. And though the oncologists don't recommend it, I haven't closed the book on the possibility of having children.

Of course, I constantly live with the specter of cancer; I know it's a small step from NED to recurrence. "With breast cancer we never use the word cure," says my oncologist Vered Stearns. OK, so I'll never say cured, but I will say alive. I'll say vital and hopeful. One year after being diagnosed with breast cancer, I'm thrilled to use the word remission.

Veggies and wheatgrass juice, but nary a dessert

If the Optimum Health Institute were a cable TV station, it would be the Vegetable Channel. OHI offers a detox program based on a raw living foods diet with wheatgrass juice.

Why detox?

"To get the toxins out of the body, out of the mind, and out of the spirit," says manager Russell Nees. Toxins come from the foods we eat and the polluted air we breathe, Nees says, as well as tension, stress and anger. "The human body is self-regenerating and self-cleansing. If given the proper tools to work with, it can maintain its natural state of well-being."

Breakfast each morning consisted of unlimited fresh fruits, usually grapefruits, oranges, kiwi or strawberries.

Lunch and dinner was veggie time. There were platters of the usual salad staples, peppers, cucumbers, corn, broccoli and asparagus. All served raw. That means no steaming, no blanching, no stir frying.

There also were bowls of sprouts, including fenugreek, buckwheat, sunflower and broccoli.

"When you sprout a seed, you increase its food value by a factor of 10," Nees says.

Lentils were in abundance. One night we also had a delicious guacamole, and one night a spicy gazpacho. In addition, there were garbanzo beans, wild rice and crunchy sesame crackers.

And dessert? They don't say that word at OHI.

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