



Chanda and her dog, Flint.

Chanda's Natural Rx

Quadriplegic Chanda Hinton turned to alternative medicine to improve her quality of life. Now this inspiring woman's foundation brings the same to others. **By Anna Dubrovsky**

tive treatments for people with disabilities. She's also the driving force behind a new state initiative to study the effects of massage, acupuncture, and chiropractic care on people with spinal cord injuries. If the study demonstrates an improvement in well-being and a reduction in medical costs, Medicaid coverage for complementary therapies could be a sealed deal.

The gunshot that nearly took Hinton's life when she was 9 was an accident. The weapon was a hunting rifle, and the shooter her 15-year-old babysitter. The boy had a gun license. In Nebraska, where Hinton grew up, lots of kids did. That wouldn't be Chanda's last brush with death. Eleven years and numerous surgeries later, chronic pain set in. Doctors prescribed Percocet for her aching back, stomach, and chest. When her body became tolerant of the narcotic, they prescribed more. "The Percocet didn't make the pain go away," she says. "It masked the pain and caused additional side effects." Hinton's stomach became so irritated that she couldn't keep food down. Her weight plunged to 59 pounds. When her older sister, Crystal Hinton, returned from a yoga retreat

in August 2003, she found Chanda emaciated and bedridden in the Denver apartment they shared.

"That was the turning point," says Crystal, a yoga teacher who had come to believe that mainstream medicine was doing more harm than good. After Chanda was hospitalized and fitted with a feeding tube, her family sat down with the Nebraska doctor who'd treated her since she was a little girl. He told Chanda it was time to try the integrative therapies that Crystal had been advocating. "You have nothing to lose, because this path isn't working for you," he conceded. The Midwestern doctor's blessing made all the difference to her traditional family, Crystal says. "It was so cool for him to finally give some value to holistic modalities, even though he didn't know anything about them," she says. "He didn't even know an acupuncturist to suggest."

After Chanda was stable enough to leave the hospital, she began sampling acupuncture, massage, electrical stimulation, and other holistic therapies. Their effect was dramatic and almost immediate. Her pain subsided. Her digestive system normalized. She gained muscle mass. The mental fog that had accompanied her long illness lifted, along with her spirits. But the treatments, unlike hospitalizations and medications, weren't covered by Medicaid. "I called up the Medicaid office and said, 'If I'm saving you money by not going to

When the bullet pierced the back of Chanda Hinton's neck, it splintered into a dozen pieces. One severed her spinal cord. Another missed a jugular vein by a half inch. "That inspires me—that I'm here just by half of an inch," says Hinton, who is paralyzed from the chest down.

At 27, Hinton is the founder of a Colorado nonprofit that funds alterna-

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the emergency room anymore, not taking all those narcotics, can't you fund the preventative treatments?" They said no. I was very naive. I said, "Who makes these decisions? Can I talk with a supervisor?" Told it was up to the state, Chanda got in touch with a lobbyist. And when the lobbyist told her that a legislative fix could take years, Chanda decided to start a nonprofit that would help people in her shoes.

The Chanda Plan Foundation raised \$150,000 in 2008. This year's goal is \$180,000. Grants from organizations like the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation account for about a quarter of the budget. The majority comes from fund-raising events like the annual People to Know benefit, which celebrates the achievements of people with disabilities. Erik Weihenmayer, the only blind person to have climbed the tallest peak on every continent, delivered the keynote address this year.

Chanda, the sole employee of the foundation, receives a salary of \$25,000 a year. The rest pays for therapies, including yoga, massage, and holistic nutrition. "We've accepted about fifteen applicants, which seems small, but what we like to do is give a significant chunk to an individual," Chanda says. "If we gave out \$200 here, \$300 there, a person might get five sessions and start feeling good, then go back to feeling bad again." People with spinal cord injuries, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and other debilitating conditions are eligible for awards.

Among the recipients is Melissa Hernandez, 27, who was hit by a car while crossing a street in August 2007. Before the accident, which left her paralyzed from the neck down, Hernandez practiced Ashtanga and hot yoga. Now she practices with Crystal, who has trained with Anusara yoga founder John Friend, and Matthew Sanford, an author and

Iyengar yoga teacher who has been a quadriplegic since childhood. "I look forward to our sessions every week because afterward I feel so much calmer and more at peace," says Hernandez. "It's like my body is trying to rejuvenate itself." She can't breathe on her own—a ventilator or diaphragmatic pacer breathes for her—but that doesn't stop her from practicing meditation by focusing on her breath. "Even though I can't control it, I still listen to the rhythm of it." The Chanda Plan also pays for her massage and acupuncture treatments.

Crystal helps students like her sister and Hernandez out of their wheelchairs and onto the floor or a bed. Using blankets and other props, she stretches their arms, legs, and spines. "It's not like Chanda is going to be doing wheel pose or bridge pose," Crystal says. "But what she can do—and what makes a huge difference for her—is to live more outside of her wheelchair so she can experience gravity in a slightly different way." When Chanda lies with a bolster supporting her spine, her shoulders sink toward the floor. The pose is an antidote to hours of sitting in a hunched position. "That's Chanda's backbend," says Crystal, 31. "She gets the same intensity from that backbend that I would get from my fullest expression of wheel pose."

The legislation Chanda championed made it through the wheels of government faster than anyone expected. She sat at Colorado Governor Bill Ritter's side when he signed the bill earlier this year. Chanda has no doubt that the study it authorized will convince Medicaid regulators to expand their conception of healing. "I know they're going to get on board," she says. "I know they're going to get it."

When they do, The Chanda Plan will still have a role to play. "Once we get Medicaid to fund these things, I don't see us going out of business," Chanda says. "We'll still have to educate people." Every fall, the foundation hosts a healing expo to teach people with disabilities about modalities their doctors may not tell them about. At a workshop the foundation hosted this summer, Crystal taught caregivers the rudiments of adaptive yoga. "Our physicians so often tell us to focus on what we can move and to forget about the parts that we can't," Chanda says. "When you have a disability, think about integrative therapy. Educate yourself. Don't let your doctors be the only people who say this is the right way and that's the wrong way." ■

Contributing editor Anna Dubrovsky writes and teaches yoga in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Chanda finds relief in simple supported poses. Her sister, Crystal, assists.

📺 Watch a video about Chanda's story and learn how you can help at thechandaplanfoundation.org.