

## IN TRIBUTE TO LAURA COOLEY: THE "JOHNNY APPLESEED" OF EAR ACUPUNCTURE IN LOUISIANA

By: Bethany E. Bultman  
BB@NOMAF.org

Laura Ellen Cooley  
July 3, 1956 Montrose, Pa  
March 23, 2024 The Jack Byrne Center for Hospice Care, Lebanon, New Hampshire

As I write this, I hear Laura's voice urging me not to waste your time reading about her. She'd insist I focus on ear acupuncture. In that respect, I believe she follows in the footsteps of the legendary Johnny "Appleseed" Chapman (1774-1845) who introduced apple trees all over the eastern part of the United States. In Laura's case, she brought ear needles to a diverse web of those in need and fought for the legislation to make this healing protocol legal.

Up until a month before she moved into hospice, she was leading an Ear Seeds for Peace Zoom presentation for acupuncture students in Seattle. I could tell you that Laura's other great passion was Cajun dancing, but she wouldn't want me to distract you. Instead, she'd remind me to be sure to begin with the ancient history of acupuncture. You see, another thing about Laura Cooley was that she was a chronicler. For those of us who were her accomplices, it would sometimes border on pain-making as she interviewed her subjects with the persistence of a dentist's drill.

### *From ancient China to Laura's U.S.A. needling mission*

Have you ever had acupuncture needles in your ears? If you were one of us fortunate humans who showed up at the New Orleans Musicians Clinic and Assistance Foundation Wednesday night Healing Hands: music and

medicine music evenings in the wake of the Katrina floods at St. Anna's Episcopal Church (Treme), then you were touched by Laura Cooley.

As she placed acupuncture needles in ears of skeptical first timers, she'd occasionally give them a history lesson by way of convincing them that she knew what she was doing.

"Within the context of Chinese Medicine (CM), this is one of the oldest forms of medicine, dating back to the Shang dynasty (14th- 11th BC)", Laura would state. "It wasn't until the early 19<sup>th</sup> C that Chinese medicine 1<sup>st</sup> arrived in the States."

(She didn't add that by the end of the 19th century, due to hostility towards Chinese immigrants, it was sidelined.)

She'd continue the narrative. "The American Community Acupuncture movement began in the 1970s as part of the wave of alternative medical practices."

Through Laura I learned that in 1971, New York Times journalist James Reston famously described his postoperative care from an acupuncturist in China in his ground breaking article, "Now, About My Operation in Peking." After that, the cat was out of the bag! Or, in this case, the needles.

1974 was, also, the year Laura graduated from Interboro High School in Prospect Park, Pa., launching herself out into the world to find her purpose.

### ***TEXAS, NADA and LAURA: A winning TRIFECTA***

While Laura lived in Austin, Texas (1981-2002), she received her acupuncture and Chinese herbal training through a 4-year apprenticeship with Brian McKenna, the Texas NADA coordinator (1987-1991), to become

a licensed acupuncturist and Registered National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) Trainer.

The ear acupuncture protocol Laura spread across the country was from The National Acupuncture Detoxification Association ([NADA](#)), founded 1985. It had evolved out of radical health activism in the South Bronx. Pioneered at Lincoln Detox, the NADA protocol was originally utilized as a supportive component in drug and alcohol treatment settings to control withdrawal symptoms, while assisting patients to become comfortable.

[Learn more about Lincoln Detox & history of the NADA protocol.](#)

(Today the NADA protocol is also called acudetox, acupuncture detoxification, 5 point ear acupuncture protocol, and/or 5NP.)

She served as the Texas-Volunteer Director of acupuncture services for the Austin HIV Wellness Center, was the Texas Organizer for the Hakomi Institute ( experiential psychotherapy), and had a private practice specializing in treating those who are HIV+.

During this time, a Texas a state law passed that made non-LAc needing a Class C misdemeanor. Laura became part of the coalition of providers who sued the state of Texas on behalf of their clients. Through their activism they identified a friendly legislator to support an acudetox exception.

**NADA Johnny *Appleseeding* in New England and beyond.....**

Then Laura Cooley, LAc, headed back east to Found the New England Public Health Acupuncture Network comprised of LAcS and ADSes

dedicated to integrating acupuncture, ear acupuncture and other self-regulating techniques into the public health system and into the hands of community members.

Nationally certified in acupuncture (NCCAOM), she held a license in Vermont and New Hampshire. Laura had trained in Somatic Experiencing, a nervous system-based trauma resolution therapy developed by Peter Levine, and Hakomi, a body-centered psychotherapy.

During her career, Laura Cooley trained more than 800 professionals in the NADA 5-point ear acupuncture protocol. From Vermont and Quebec to Texas and Louisiana she supervised programs that utilized ear acupuncture in drug treatment programs, jails, hospitals, homeless and HIV outreach programs.

Not only was Laura a healer, but she was also an astute activist. In her role as NADA's Legislative Liaison, Laura focused on overcoming the barriers to the healing power of community acupuncture. She taught me that without legislation, however, connecting "alternative care" to underserved communities in group settings was often illegal. Thus, Laura facilitated the passage of a ACU-DETOX bills in Texas, Louisiana, Rhode Island and New Hampshire which allowed for AcuDetox Technicians, and advocated for expanded access to Acudetox in NH, VT and Montreal, and Medicaid coverage of acupuncture for pain management.

Her interest in global healing traditions brought her as a NADA trainer to the Acoma Pueblo, Jemez Pueblo and the Mescalero Apache and Cheyenne River Reservations. It facilitated training in Louisiana via the musician Mac Rebennack (Dr. John) with the Houma Nation.

For more about Laura's NADA Activism:

Harvard series on ear acupuncture

<https://acudetox.com/harvard-video-series-on-ear-acupuncture-research-starts-in-new-hampshire/>

From Acupuncture to Involuntary Commitment: Alternative Approaches to the Opioid Crisis

<https://www.nhpr.org/the-exchange/2017-10-18/from-acupuncture-to-involuntary-commitment-alternative-approaches-to-the-opioid-crisis>

*"La. Laura" to the rescue 2005 and beyond...*

In those first years after the flood waters left their water mark on all of our souls in New Orleans (August-September 2005), I was one of the majority in our city whose sense of well-being was severely "bent not broken." As the founding director of a musician's advocacy ngo, my task was to offer hope and solutions. In fact I had little of either, but I had dry bed, access to food and working internet and phone so had no reason to "whine."

Many of the New Orleans Musicians Clinic patients had lost their homes, lost their income from performing, our clinic was lost to the floods, our bank account was inaccessible, and President George Bush was unsure in our city was worth rebuilding.

In the midst of this crisis, I got a call from a woman who wanted me to connect her with groups of musicians who'd like to have needles stuck in their ears. Our room full of volunteers had a good laugh. Mirth, being in very short supply in our makeshift office.

The next day, the call was followed up by an email.

It introduced me to CRREW (Community Relief & Rebuilding through Education and Wellness). CRREW was formed in the aftermath of 9/11 co-founded by Wendy Henry and Marcella Robinson to offer ear acupuncture, holistic services, and wellness education to First Responders in the fire houses that had lost 343 fellow firefighters and others directly impacted by that tragedy. The CRREW volunteers were a lifeline to all those living through that trauma.

In the wake of New Orleans being flooded by federal levee failure the International Association of Fire Fighters not only came to aid the city, they invited CRREW to assist in the staging areas in St. Bernard and New Orleans. Before the flood waters receded, they were transported by the IAFF in small aircraft to the incident command center in New Orleans.

As the flood waters receded , Laura Cooley, who Wendy Henry had collaborated with post 9/11 to offer NADA services, joined the CRREW team in New Orleans at Holy Cross. There they heard live music. It was a community balm to offer a beacon of cultural solidarity and hope to those who lost everything. The team learned that the New Orleans Musicians Clinic and Assistance Fdn was paying musicians to play in shelters. Which is what lead to the phone call the day before.

Yes, I believed, those who had helped traverse the trauma of 9/11 in NYC were just what we needed! Soon Wednesday nights at St. Anna's became my oasis of calm. Laura Cooley was staying with the NOMC nurse practitioner, Catherine Lasperches(FNP), advising and nudging us into an attitude adjustment. We would survive, one needle at time. An unexpected outcome was that these "outsiders" became vital to our community as they validated our experiences and bore witness to the struggles of those that

were directly impacted by the trauma. They bolstered our physical and mental well-being where we were at that point in time.

During those first months, I would walk back into my life wearing five distinctive skin color patches on each ear with a tiny disposable acupuncture seeds. They could be pressed night and day for a jolt of calm until my next weekly NADA treatment.

You can image that as the director of a non-profit in a city in crisis, I attended lots of mind-numbing meetings. People would ask what those things were on my ears? Why I kept touching them? Then a few of them came to check out St. Anna's/NOMC/AF's weekly Healing Hands. By Christmas 2007, there could be 16 people in a meeting and half of us would be sporting little beige patches on our ears. And I would silently thank Laura and Wendy.

But, you see, each of those caregivers "needling" us were breaking Louisiana law. Laura went into action. She demanded that a handful of other ngo leaders FOCUS on changing the law. I introduced her to some of our LSU Medical Center doctors who served on the state medical board and politicians who were visiting shelters where she was needling. Fire Captains from around the state lobbied their parish politicians. Thanks to Laura's nimble political maneuvering on Oct 30 2008, NOMC affiliate, Jeanne Dumestre, RN was awarded Louisiana ADS license Number 1.

Simultaneously Laura and Wendy urged NOMC/AF to take leadership in facilitating NADA training. A grant was awarded to us from the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps to support Laura Cooley conducting a training. The National Acupuncture Detoxification Association, Acupuncture Detoxification Specialist training began June 6, 2008 at the New Orleans

Musicians Assistance Foundation's world headquarters in the Garden District (uptown).

Twenty-two people registered for the training with a long waiting list. Those pioneering trainees included 3 body workers (massage therapists and Feldenkrais practitioner); 2 musician patients of the NOMC, 1 director of a community center; 2 nurse practitioners, 3 social workers: an NOMC nurse resident; one Fire Dept. Captain from Shreveport; 1 NOMC&AF cultural program director and the director of the sister program in Lafayette.

As part of their NADA training, the Louisiana NADA pioneers needed to be supervised for a minimum of 40 clinical hours each. The community building aspect was a major component of the success of needling in New Orleans. Within a few months, 100s of people had received community ear acupuncture from one of them at: our Musician's Clinic Healing Hands at St Anna's, St. Joseph's Homeless Shelter & St. Bernard's Community Center (both places served by the St. Anna's Mobile Van), St. Bernard Firehouses, Grace House and Bridge House addiction recovery centers, Tulane Youth Drop-in Center, Uptown Holistic Center, and private venues.

Laura Cooley was a dynamic force on the front line of disaster relief from 9/11 to Katrina to the Gulf Oil Spill (2010). As a chronicler, Laura was the Director and Producer of [Unimagined Bridges](#), a film addressing the efficacy of ear acupuncture for disaster/trauma relief in the aftermath of 9/11, and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Full film: <https://vimeo.com/433247105/c587582ff8?share=copy>

Film trailer: <https://acudetox.com/unimagined-bridges-trailer/>

The simple power of sitting quietly each week with a dozen or so strangers and colleagues, all with needles in our ears truly sustained me. There were



musicians, fire fighters, homeless, the cast and crew of HBO's Treme, relief volunteers, neighborhood elders and police, all sharing that communal sense of peace.

I recall one young homeless, former addict who was reluctant at first to get needled. He seemed drawn to join the aura of circle we were in, though. Afterwards he couldn't quit telling random people outside of St. Anna's....." ... oh man, it's like my mind isn't racing... it's like I can hear quiet, man ...wanna hear something really weird it's like I could do mathematics now !..."

And that, was all thanks to Laura's dedication, Louisiana's Johnny Appleseed of needling.

### *Now we must bid adieu to our Laura*

Do you have a soundtrack for your life? As with so much of what Laura did, she had a plan. Part of this was sharing with some of us the songs she played for comfort. I play them as I write this:

Sinead O'Connor "Thank you for hearing me"

The Beach Boys "Feel Flows

Beau Jocque and the Zydeco Hi-Rollers "Knockin on Heaven's Door"

A few weeks ago I was invited to join the Facebook group chat that connected dozens of her devoted comrades from New Hampshire, New Mexico, Vermont, Texas, Montreal and as far away as the NADA network in Denmark and the Philippines , 9-11 first responders from NYC and many of us from Louisiana. You could say, we were connected by Laura's needles.

I offer my tribute to Laura as my way of expressing my gratitude to each of you keep her memory alive.

- Bethany E. Bultman  
Good Friday, 2024