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### JOURNEY TO HEALING

Date: March 9, 2008 Edition(s): News & Record Page: D1 Section: Life **Source:** TINA FIRESHEETS STAFF WRITER The shaman started the ceremony with a blessing. Reciting a prayer in his Andean dialect, he made the sign of the cross with his hand. Thomasville native **Amy Greeson** stood before him, unafraid. She traveled across the Atlantic Ocean and below the equator for this experience.

The shaman placed rose petals into the palm of his hand, then mixed them with oil. He dipped his index finger into the mixture, then made the sign of the cross on her forehead.

Finally, he blew smoke from a cigarette several times into the crown of Greeson's head. Some call this area the "crown chakra," and it's believed to be the body's energy center.

His breath felt warm against Greeson's scalp. Her body felt light, her spirit peaceful.

One week later, she was back behind the counter of her small pharmacy, dispensing mass-produced, FDA-approved tablets, capsules and creams to treat various ailments.

Thomasville Pharmacy doesn't have a drive-through window. You can't buy magazines or groceries here. Greeson and her father are Amy and Joe to the customers who patronize this family business, a disappearing breed in the era of chain pharmacies. It's decorated with mortars and pestles, collected by Joe Greeson through the years.

**Amy Greeson**, who is more apt to give a hug than a handshake, often comes from behind the counter to advise her customers.

It's the last place you'd expect to find a pharmacist with the spirit of an explorer and an eye toward therapies that are both cutting-edge and profoundly traditional.

Both worlds make sense to **Amy Greeson**, who runs the pharmacy, co-hosts the Internet radio show "Global Healing" and regularly visits jungles and rain forests to learn about alternative, ancient forms of healing.

"No matter where you go in life, whether it's in the state of North Carolina or halfway around the world," she says, "you can always learn."

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"Amy always wanted to go to work with her dad," says mom Barbara Greeson. "Maybe that was a sign."

When she was about 5 years old, **Amy Greeson** became a perpetual stowaway in her dad's Volkswagen.

While Joe Greeson brushed his teeth after breakfast, Amy - still wearing her footed pajamas - would run and hide under an old Army blanket that was always in the back seat. She tried to keep still and quiet until they arrived at the pharmacy.

When the car stopped, Amy would spring out from under the blanket, yelling, "Surprise!"

"I wanted to be with him all the time," says **Amy Greeson**, now 41.

Joe Greeson eventually learned to check under the blanket before leaving home.

As a child, Amy used to pretend she was a surgeon. She enrolled in UNC-Chapel Hill, intending to go to medical school. But her summer experience at what was then Community General Hospital in Thomasville revealed she was too sensitive for such work. While caring for terminally ill patients, Greeson suffered severe stress-related headaches, something that never happened before or since.

Still interested in medicine, she applied for UNC-CH's pharmacy school, her dad's alma mater.

"I always loved and respected my father so much, and I knew it was an honorable profession," Greeson says.

After her acceptance, she waited a week to tell her parents.

"I wanted to make sure it was what I wanted to do," she says. "I didn't want to disappoint them if I changed my mind."

Now, she drives an SUV with a license plate that reads "HEAL."

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Two forces have always guided Greeson: a love of family and an adventurous spirit.

She completed a student externship in Alaska the summer after graduating from pharmacy school in 1990. A year later, she returned there to work as a pharmacist.

Her schedule was one week on, one week off, with plenty of time to hike, bike and ski across the Alaskan wilderness. She loved skiing at night, hearing only her skis whooshing across the snow. The northern lights illuminated the bright white landscape.

Greeson's parents sent a certified letter in 1994, asking her to consider joining the family business. Though she would miss her friends and the wilderness in Alaska, Greeson felt the longing for family pulling her home.

She started managing the business nearly six years ago. Her father fills in on her days off and when she travels.

"I didn't think I'd be in the same town I grew up in," she says. "But it's neat to work with my dad."

Greeson also seeks change. If there's anything she fears, it's stagnation.

Not content to be limited to the traditional practice of pharmacy, she began studying herbal remedies in 1997 and earned national certification in herbal medicine two years later. She's one of just a handful of pharmacists in North Carolina with this certification.

The more she learned, the more she wanted to learn. Many pharmaceuticals are made from herbs, plants and animals found in the Amazon.

It was ethnobotanist Richard Schultes who discovered that poison from the tiny poison arrow frog could be used in open heart surgery because it paralyzes all of the muscles in the body, except the heart. He also found a plant mixture that led to the development of anesthesia drugs used today.

But for Greeson, it isn't enough to learn just from textbooks. In 1999, she accompanied Constance Grauds, a pharmacist and natural medicine expert, to Peru where they studied indigenous healing practices with a shaman.

Greeson immediately felt a connection to the jungle. Although she needed an interpreter to communicate with the villagers, she felt a bond with them, too.

"Someone cannot say a word to you, but the way they look at you, the warmth in their eyes (shows kindness)," she says.

Greeson's next journey took her to Belize in 2002, where she joined five physicians and a pharmacist. They learned about the healing properties of plants there. Greeson then realized that the medicines used there had significance, relevance and power.

"It reinforced the idea that both worlds of medicine are meant to come together and both worlds have something to teach the other," she says.

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Greeson believes the cure for many diseases lies in the rain forest - if it can be preserved. Harvard ethnobotanists discovered that the bark of a tree had a compound that seemed to knock HIV-1 right out of the test tube. But when they returned for more bark, it wasn't there because the trees had been cut down.

"When I heard that, it gave me chills," Greeson says. "It reinforces the point, too ... the more awareness we bring, the more likely we're able to save these areas."

So, in addition to studying alternative healing, she's filming a documentary series about her travels with the dual goals of teaching people about indigenous healing traditions and reinforcing the need to preserve the rain forest.

It's an expensive endeavor. When Greeson decided to make the documentaries, titled "The Healing Seekers," she traveled to Ecuador in 2006 with three to five film crew members, paying all of their travel expenses. She hired entertainment attorneys and several film editors.

Grace and Cary Kanoy of Thomasville were part of the film crew in Ecuador. Both have film-making experience, and Cary Kanoy runs a company specializing in adventure travel in Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands. Cary Kanoy's familiarity with Ecuador helped them find

reputable shamans.

Although the Kanoys travel extensively, Grace Kanoy says their work on Greeson's documentary made her notice all living things.

"It's not just about saving a tree, but it might save someone's life," Grace Kanoy says. "That blade of grass or that animal's behavior might lead to something significant."

This summer, Greeson plans to go to Madagascar with a film crew. She's now seeking funding to pay for that project. She hopes their series will be picked up by public television or a national network.

She's confident her investment will pay off.

"I'm constantly thinking, 'One day, it's going to be better,' " Greeson says. "We're going to be able to help so-and-so better than we are today, and I truly believe that. Otherwise, I wouldn't do it."

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The Andean shamana, or medicine woman, was told that Greeson had surgery and she didn't have much energy. That's all.

Greeson didn't indicate where the surgery was, nor did the shamana ask.

She simply placed a blanket on the dirt floor and asked Greeson to lie down.

The other patients had sat in chairs, and Greeson wondered why she was asked to lie down.

The shamana went to Greeson's abdominal area, and started to apply strong pressure.

"It was like she was trying to push certain things around," Greeson says.

The woman picked up one of Greeson's legs and shook it a few times, then returned it to the floor. She did the same with the other leg. She repeated this three times.

At the end of the ceremony, she brought a new, woven cloth and wrapped it very tightly - like a girdle - around Greeson's abdomen. Greeson was to wear it for two days. Through a translator, the woman told her that some things were out of place in that area and that they were blocking her energy.

Greeson was stunned. Her organs had been shifted in surgery to remove a tumor from behind her kidney in 2000. But how could the shamana know that?

"I was blown away - totally blown away," Greeson says.

"I thought (the ceremony) would be more of a general cleansing of my aura. But the fact that she actually tuned in to right where my doctors had been working, floored me."

Greeson says she does feel more energetic.

Some naysayers may doubt the abilities of indigenous healers, but Greeson says it's not unlike

some people's belief in the power of prayer.

"I love scientific evidence," she says. " I love to see things that are proven. But in the same respect, there are a lot of things that exist in life that we can't see, but we know it's there."

Even in pharmacy, it's not always known why a drug is effective. Clinical trials just prove its success.

"Because we don't know everything about something doesn't mean that we should discredit the validity," Greeson says.

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Healing practices of indigenous medicine men may seem farfetched to some Westerners, but more patients are exploring alternative forms of medicine, says Stefanie Ferreri, director of the community pharmacy residency program at the UNC School of Pharmacy.

The National Institutes of Health is funding more studies to explore herbal supplements because patients are taking them and seeing benefits, Ferreri says.

More people are turning to complementary and alternative medicines, or CAM, she says. This includes herbal medicines, acupuncture, homeopathy and aromatherapy. A study conducted in 2002 showed an estimated 36 percent of adults reported using at least one form of CAM.

Greeson provides herbal medicine consultations at her pharmacy. If a patient has cancer or more complicated medical issues, she also consults with his physician. Ferreri says pharmacists are the better health care providers to explore alternative medicines because of their training. They know how different drugs will interact.

"It's a great niche for pharmacists to get involved in for their patients who want to take herbal (remedies)," Ferreri says.

Pharmacy in the U.S. is evidence-based, relying heavily on studies. But Ferreri says that if one considers the healing process throughout primitive cultures, it's evident that most medicines were derived from plant life.

"She's almost going back to the roots of the source to see what works for patients," Ferreri says of Greeson.

Greeson says she has never been more sure about her purpose in life.

"It gives me hope that a lot of the things that I'm dispensing are vital to people's lives," she says. "But I realize that a lot of them are helping with the problem, but it's not getting to the core root of the problem. I think we can do better."

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203 E. Harris Place, Eden, NC 27288 (336) 627-1781  
4213 S. Church Street, Burlington, NC 27215 (336) 449-7064

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