

By Brian Falzarano
November 15, 2011

"Best-Kept Secret" ACAP Continues to Help Others

Livingston-based academy in 31st year of offering low-fee consultation and training others to use Modern Psychoanalysis to lead more fulfilling lives.

Surrounded by mostly bare white walls in an otherwise nondescript office building at the North Jersey Consultation Center on South Livingston Avenue in Livingston, the faculty and directors of the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis explained the reasoning behind their relatively anonymous and spartan surroundings.

"We have always considered our patients to deserve confidentiality," Executive Director Vicki Semel said.

Although their building is easy to overlook – and their practice was openly questioned by rival colleagues before psychoanalysis was acknowledged by state law – the work they have done in this, their 31st year of operation, warrants attention.

ACAP's four directors – all of whom are licensed professionals with private practices who volunteer their hundreds of hours annually in Livingston – administer a low-fee clinic that allows patients to pay what they feel the treatment is worth after a \$40 initial registration fee, regardless of whether they possess health insurance.

The directors are among 39 individuals (and among 14 faculty members) who donate more than 20,000 hours per year in helping others mainly from the Essex and Morris County areas overcome trauma while facilitating personal growth and development.

"We're the best-kept secret in New Jersey," Director of Development Patricia Bratt said.

If ACAP is relatively anonymous now, it was almost invisible when it began 30 years ago. Director of curriculum Sheila Zaretsky, who along with Semel was around at the outset in 1980, laughed when she understated that their practice was "much smaller" then: Indeed, meetings were only held every other Saturday in the basement of a Madison church and the academy had only six students, four faculty members and no treatment service.



Before coming to Livingston, ACAP stopped over in Morristown – and encountered rival colleagues who questioned the validity of psychoanalysis.

Although Semel noted that "almost every mental health profession tries to stop the recognition of the next mental health profession" by offering the example of how psychiatrists opposed psychologists, she proudly noted how their detractors rallied everyone within their ranks – including donors and volunteers – to help them lobby then-Governor Christie Whitman to get psychoanalysis recognized by state law in 2000.

"This galvanized us that they would come after us and try to put us out of business when we were treating people that nobody wanted to treat," Semel said. "We have never turned away a patient because of diagnosis or fee."

Even more proudly, the ACAP directors note how they help first-responders, children and people from all walks of life; Zaretsky said 70 percent of mental-health experience in children come from trauma.

"With our approach, we're able to work comfortably with severe pathology," Zaretsky said. "We're able to work comfortably with severe schizophrenics, bipolars and difficult diagnoses that many groups won't work with."

ACAP's four directors, which also includes Administrative Director Maurice Lovell, spend blocks of hours assisting in 50-minute sessions. They also teach classes and help train administrators, analysts, clergy, nurses, social workers, and teachers how to apply tools of modern psychoanalysis in their respective fields.

"We've done so many amazingly positive things for large numbers of people," Bratt said. "And we're still a secret. That's because we're busy working."