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Lafayette Massage Practices Struggle to Overcome Negative Stigma

By Sophie Braccini



Heather Schlachter in front of Somatic Therapy Associates in Lafayette. Photo Sophie Braccini

About a year ago the story of brothels masquerading as massage parlors exploded in Lafayette. The city reacted sending in undercover officers who arrested some 'masseuses' and adopting regulations that now require all massage practitioners to be certified. But uncertainty remains, and legitimate practices are suffering.

On a recent Tuesday night at Busy Stix in Lafayette, several ladies sat around the large oval table and chit-chatted while knitting. Heather Schlachter of Somatic Therapy Associates, which is located in the cottage next to the yarn boutique, came with a massage chair to give those who needed it relief from the shoulder tension that can build when knitting.

"The ladies started to talk about the massage places in Lafayette," said Busy Stix owner Marcia Brenning, "and said that they had such a bad reputation that they would be afraid to go to one of them." They even feared being sexually abused.

Schlachter was distressed to hear this, but not that surprised. "We've had new clients that indicated that they had been very hesitant to come because of the bad reputation of massage practices in Lafayette," she said. "The other day, a gentleman came in and after talking with a massage therapist said he was relieved that we were

legitimate."

Schlachter, who has been operating in her cute little cottage for more than 10 years, said that this year business was significantly slower than previous years. She now places her coupons for distribution in Walnut Creek. "There are too many rumors in Lafayette," she said.

Lafayette Community Services Officer Cathy Surges-Moscato says that these fears are unfounded. "We meet every week to discuss the situation of the massage practices in Lafayette," she said. "All the massage practices have to apply for a license and we do check them when they do. Many existing ones have come forward, and at this time everybody is in compliance." Surges-Moscato added that the Lafayette Police make unannounced visits to ensure everything is what it is supposed to be. Unfortunately, the bad reputation has continued.

Massage Cottage owner Jana Lynn has been practicing since 1988 and was very surprised last week when a sales representative working for the Yellow Pages told her over the phone that she would not know where to go for a massage in Lafayette because the city had such a bad reputation.

"The wide media coverage inflamed people's opinions," said Lynn, "but we are all professionals here and we are ready for business."

Each massage establishment is required to have a California certification for each of the professionals working there. They in turn get a certificate of registration with the city that patrons can ask to see.

But the process isn't always simple. Schlachter had problems getting her California certification since the place she graduated from, the Sacramento Massage School, is now closed. "When I started there was no state certification and I didn't keep all of my transcripts," she said. Of the five therapists who work with her at Somatic, she said the younger ones had no problem getting their licenses, but the older and more experienced therapists had more difficulty. But she feels it's worth going through a longer process if it can reassure potential clients.

Currently, there are about a dozen massage practices in Lafayette. The only problem is finding the place that's right for you.

"Most people ask their friends or colleagues for a referral," said Robyn Scherr, a craniosacral therapist who operates Living in the Body. "Would you go to a dentist without a recommendation?"

If you can't find a referral, check with the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, visit the massage practice's website, read online reviews, or check the masseur's credentials.

But have no fear. With Mother's Day right around the corner, Lafayette is a great place to unwind with a fantastic massage.

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