The Institute for Integrative Health

Igniting an epidemic of health

Chronic disease affects one in three Americans. The Institute for Integrative Health in Baltimore, USA, believes that the path to improving health should involve not just medicine but an understanding of all the dynamic processes that contribute to wellbeing: economics, nutrition, work, relationships, the environment. In this article, founders Brian Berman and Susan Hartnoll Berman explain how they hope their approach can help reverse this health crisis.

The Institute for Integrative Health (TIIH) is a non-profit charitable organisation aiming to create a wellness model that shifts the focus of healthcare from managing disease to a more holistic approach of lifelong health. By bringing together researchers and students from many disciplines, and through a range of demonstration programmes, TIH aims to empower individuals and communities to imagine and build a brighter future for themselves and others.

Research Features caught up with Brian Berman, Founder and President, and Susan Hartnoll Berman, Executive Director and Co-founder, to find out more.

What is the mission of The Institute for Integrative Health?

At its heart, the Institute is a think tank with an activist approach. We seek to improve the health of individuals, communities and the planet. Our vision is to ignite an epidemic of health, a place where as many people as possible live as healthily as possible for as long as possible. Our mission is to catalyse new ideas in health and healthcare, and to better understand all the factors that are interrelated to create and lead up to influencing health, and then to take all that information and use it to promote the health of individuals, places and communities.

The Integrative Health approach takes the discussion of health and wellbeing beyond what occurs in the doctor’s office. It takes into account the complex interplay of economics, social factors, the environmental determinants of health, equity issues, as well as healthy lifestyle choices.

Do you have a strategy for addressing factors that promote health inequality, such as poverty, access to medical care, local and national policies?

The first thing we say is that we need to take a step back and think about, how can we imagine a brighter future for everyone? What kind of a world do we want it to live in? Rather than rushing into it, what’s the strategy? For individuals, that process can heighten our awareness and shift attitudes and perspectives. It can enrich people’s purpose, which can help to increase fulfilment and improve our physical health as well as our mental and spiritual resilience. For groups, a process like this can really help to magnify this change. It’s almost like a contagion that occurs, creating a shared purpose and getting people enthused about making the changes that are necessary. Putting some of the power back into us as individuals and communities is really important; by changing our thoughts, we can reshape our future. We are at a point of transition where we can really change how we do things. By taking that step back at first and imagining what kind of world we want to live in, the strategies will fall out.

We bring together thought leaders from very diverse backgrounds through our Scholars, Fellows, and Visionaries programme. There are no simple answers to these very complex problems, and we need to look at it from a complex systems approach in order to address what’s going on. We hold forums and those also have demonstration projects.

Can you tell us more about ‘Building Bridges, Defining Metrics’?

Some of what we are doing is grassroots community-based, like our demonstration projects in Baltimore. Usually, there are many stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, all pulling in the same direction in terms of wanting kids to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives, but also with somewhat differing agendas: for example, the principal of a school’s ultimate goal is that his kids successfully graduate. ‘Building Bridges, Defining Metrics’ is an example of the multidisciplinary forums that we organise to look at sticky issues and come up with innovative answers. At this event, we brought people together and asked them...
The Institute inspires students to source, cook, and spice their own foods.

Being Heard’ Exhibition by Scholar Judy Rollins.

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We try to offer researchers the freedom and encouragement to really go for it and think from that ‘Einstein space’ between knowledge and imagination.

Are there any ongoing research projects you’d like to tell us about? What visionary research are you most excited about? I would like to tell you about an exciting new endeavour called Project Earthrise that we launched last December at a virtual conference of the same name, co-sponsored with an interdisciplinary group called inWV. With Project Earthrise we’re going back to a sense of awe and wonder and calling on the best of human nature to overcome our greatest challenges. We have to fundamentally question what kind of values we want to base things on. It is inspired by the earthrise photograph taken by Bill Anders from Apollo Eight in the 1960s. As the head of NASA said, we spent billions and billions of dollars on this project and the most impactful outcome was a 15-cent photograph. Are there any ongoing research projects you’d like to tell us about? What visionary research are you most excited about? I would like to tell you about an exciting new endeavour called Project Earthrise that we launched last December at a virtual conference of the same name, co-sponsored with an interdisciplinary group called inWV. With Project Earthrise we’re going back to a sense of awe and wonder and calling on the best of human nature to overcome our greatest challenges. We have to fundamentally question what kind of values we want to base things on. It is inspired by the earthrise photograph taken by Bill Anders from Apollo Eight in the 1960s. As the head of NASA said, we spent billions and billions of dollars on this project and the most impactful outcome was a 15-cent photograph. At the same time, there were a lot of questions that emerged about what we were actually doing in the world right now; there is a lot of fear and uncertainty. There really are ways out of this, and it’s within us. The whole mystery of life, and hope and healing can absolutely occur. So just join in and stay tuned for things that are going on! There’s room for everyone who wants to be involved.

Brian Berman, Founder and President of The Institute for Integrative Health, with Susan Hartnell Berman, Executive Director and Co-founder.

Back in 2015, the Baltimore uprising following the death of a young black man, Freddie Gray, at the hands of the police shook a light on the cracks in the system, the incredible inequities in our city and society. We worked with a local young man, Devin Allen, a talented, self-taught photographer who had given out in the middle of the uprising, taking photographs that became a whole body of work called ‘A Beautiful Ghetto’. It captured the extreme emotions of the uprising, but it also expressed the beauty of the community. Our headquarters are in an old warehouse building and we put his work up on the walls. We invited the community in, and we just let them do artwork to respond to it. It was inspired by our Scholar Paul Dieppe’s work where he asked people to draw what healing meant to them. We had art materials out on tables, and people could draw on these and answer the question, “how are we healing?” We created this whole exhibit within an exhibit. We held yoga classes, we held poetry writing sessions, we had children come in from schools. We had activists come in and talk about what they were trying to do. Conversations went on between people who had never met before, standing in front of these works of art and all these photographs and discussing how they felt. This taught us that, yes, things look bleak, but we are connected. And we can come together. And we can create a better world.