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Alumna In Action, September 2008, Daphne Berwind-Dart '01



An unconventional woman for her day, Ida Pauline Rolf '16 created the alternative health field of Rolfing, or Structural Integration, a system of soft-tissue manipulation designed to treat aches, pains, and other symptoms by restoring the body's proper alignment. Rolfing is also meant to improve posture, balance, energy, and flexibility. Today, Daphne Berwind-Dart '01, who graduated from Barnard nearly a century later, owns a thriving Rolfing practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Berwind-Dart started her practice two and a half years ago, but the path she originally chose was one that she considers conventional, majoring in English literature with the goal of pursuing a PhD. She worked in public relations before deciding to make the transition to the field of alternative health. "I realized I wanted to challenge myself in different ways and set my own goals and be my own boss," she says, and adds that her Barnard experience was influential in helping her go out on her own.

She first encountered Rolfing as a Barnard student, and "the experience blew me away, it transformed me." A fellow member of the Barnard-Columbia chorus advised her to meet with his wife, a Rolfer, in order to help Berwind-Dart's back pain. The 10 sessions were transformational, making her "feel revitalized and more present" in her body. Until she began her training to become a Certified Rolfer, however, she was unaware that she shared an alma mater with the practice's founder. The discovery, however, did not surprise her. "Dr. Rolf was one of the gutsiest, most provocative thinkers I've ever studied," she explains. "She was a radical in her day, a real pioneer, and her work continues to make an enormous impact on the field of bodywork as well as my own philosophical inquiries into the relationship between mind and body. She had the kind of courage and determination that Barnard fosters in its students, and I'm happy to number myself among those women who have followed their hearts and intellectual curiosity into pathbreaking fields."

Besides Berwind-Dart's experience with Rolfing, more aspects of her time at Barnard, including a supportive environment and a "fantastic" academic experience, played a role in shaping her path. As she explains, "I became really independent at Barnard. I felt very much encouraged by my professors and advisers to do my own thing, to follow my heart. It took me a couple of years after college to fully get up the courage to leave my secure corporate job and start my own business, but I am so happy that I went that route and I love being self-employed."

While the idea of leaving a secure job to pursue something more unconventional may be frightening, Berwind-Dart encourages others to follow their dreams, citing her own experience as an example of the rewards of doing so. "I really do believe hard work and passion are the keys to success. So I'd say take the plunge, I think it's always worth it." Berwind-Dart's satisfaction with her career is readily apparent as she discusses her plans for the future, which include taking workshops to learn all that she can about Rolfing and continue to grow. "For now, I can't imagine not doing this anytime soon. I see this as a lifelong challenge."

—Amanda Lanceter '09