

Healing with Style and Substance

BY LINDA K. NATHAN

Wearing a chic '60s Pucci dress, Sharon Herzfeld '88S rarely talks about her fondness for vintage fashion. Instead, the 36-year-old doctor prefers to muse about the human brain, which she calls “the last great frontier of the unknown.” That’s why she chose pediatric neurology as her specialty, she explains from her office at New York University Medical Center.

As for medicine in general, Dr. Herzfeld credits Stern College and “extraordinary” mentors such as Dr. David Shatz, professor of philosophy, and Dr. Charles Raffel, assistant professor of Jewish philosophy, with preparing her mentally and spiritually for a tough profession. “I was exposed to ideas I wouldn’t have been exposed to elsewhere,” says Herzfeld, a philosophy major. Indeed, she says, “having gone to Stern is a gift,” a place where “Jewish ethics are guiding principles.” Today that influence guides her work with sick children: “To help the healing process is inseparable from my identity as a Jew,” she says.

Pediatric neurology is not considered uplifting; Herzfeld herself defines it as a “humbling” endeavor, especially when a particular disease is untreatable. But, “That’s when I realize that the quality of the human interaction is essential.”

Yet, there are victories. One of her favorites involves a seven-year-old boy hospitalized for sudden-onset leg paralysis. A spinal tap, MRI, and other tests yielded normal results, and Herzfeld recounts that the youngster’s examination was inconsistent with true paralysis. “I kept thinking that somehow he just did not want to move his legs.” After much discussion with the hospital’s staff and the boy’s mother, she decided to test her intuition. “We told him we were giving him medicine intravenously that would help him walk again.”

Midway through the “procedure,” the boy screamed, “But I can’t walk!”

“So let’s dance!” Herzfeld responded, lifting him off the table. Then both doctor and patient started swirling around the nursing station! The lesson? “Everyone (a child being no exception) needs a back door, a way out of something that’s embarrassing. This story,” Herzfeld says, “was really about a



child desperate for attention and support.”

There was no shortage of desperate patients for Herzfeld during her studies at Tel Aviv University’s Sackler School of Medicine, from which she graduated in 1995. She trained in eight hospitals throughout Israel, working side by side with Israeli paratroopers who had become medical residents. Their patients were Israeli Arabs, Jews, and difficult cases from all over the globe. “Everyone received the highest standard of care—with the greatest compassion,” Herzfeld says, recalling the image of an elderly Arab woman being tended to with dignity and skill by Israeli doctors. “Illness cuts across all cultural lines. When people are sick, there are no differences.”

Today her busy private practice includes seeing patients on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Other days, she volunteers in her community—Manhattan’s Lower East Side—and in her synagogue. “It’s important to incorporate some aspect of *hesed* [charitable good deeds] into your day,” she says, calling her approach to Judaism “humanistic.” It is a perspective she says she honed under the tutelage of her Stern College mentors, and one she is eager to develop in her own children, three-year-old Moselle and six-month-old Tova.

“When I’m out walking with Moselle, sometimes we’ll see homeless people and I’ll ask her how she thinks we can help them. Usually she offers them her snacks in case they may be hungry. There’s a collection bin in a nearby neighborhood, and whenever we go that way, we always bring clothes to drop off. These are my way of introducing her to the idea that kindness is a fundamental principle of Judaism. I want my children to know that it’s important to think about and help people who have had less fortunate experiences.” ■