

Taking Care of Business

Counseling Group offers unique service featuring several disciplines

By: KELLY JOSEPHSEN
kjosephsen@islandernews.com

A Key Biscayne resident's interdisciplinary approach to mental health is taking off in the form of a growing counseling service located right off-island in The Roads.

She says it all came about thanks to a "shared vision" among a number of talented therapists.

Silvia Almeida Vaquero founded The Counseling Group in Coral Gables with business partner Alma Lovaton Quagliato several years ago. The growing business moved to its current location in the Roads Professional Center, 2739 SW 3rd Avenue Suite 501, about a year-and-a-half ago.

Almeida Vaquero and Lovaton Quagliato are Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists with years of experience, and had been working together for some time when The Counseling Group was formed.

They were approached by several other professionals – two psychologists (Luz Maria Barrio and Robert Blackgrove) with experience in academic, intelligence and psychological testing as well as sex therapy; and a nutritionist/dietician (Ivonne Hamilton) who works with patients with eating disorders – about creating a new company. They immediately embraced the idea.

"We had a shared vision," Almeida Vaquero, a Key Biscayner for 15 years, explained. "You get so much more information with a lot of eyes. We're a multi-disciplinary team – we each have our area of expertise, so not only can we refer to each other, we can offer our clients a team approach."

The unique approach has been working well, Almeida Vaquero said, and The Counseling Group hopes to add even more disciplines to its roster. She is already talking with pediatricians, physical therapists and plastic surgeons in Key Biscayne and Coral Gables, all of who can provide valuable partnerships.

Pediatricians can help with kids who have ADHD and similar disorders, she explained, while physical therapy patients who suffered a severe trauma or are dealing with chronic pain can benefit from The Counseling Group's mind/body approach. Finally, she said, the plastic surgeons can refer patients who need help working through underlying body image or self esteem issues.

Those aren't the only developments in the works for The Counseling Group, Almeida Vaquero added.

Group therapy workshops, which will be

open to the public, are coming soon. The first event will focus on eating disorders, she said; details are available at www.counselinggroupmiami.com.

Workshops will be held in The Counseling Group's newly-built group room, which will also be used for private group sessions. Meanwhile, the clinic is adding a web cam, which will be helpful when patients have to receive their counseling via telephone sessions; and intense "marathon sessions," home visits and even school visits are already among the services offered to clients.

"One of the visions we had was to go outside the box," Almeida Vaquero said. "We wanted to switch from the traditional approach to have more flexibility."

The business is open from 8 a.m.-8 p.m. during the week, allowing for appointments after the school and work day. Saturday hours are also available. Doctors will see patients as often as is needed, taking the patient's work schedule and financial situation into consideration.

"We want to make it as easy as possible," Almeida Vaquero explained.

Flexibility isn't the only key to doing so, she added. Almeida Vaquero said The Counseling Group tries to make its offices "a place of healing, a place of relaxation, a place of peace."

To that end, a "spa-like" atmosphere was created, complete with the scent of lavender, soft music and a comfortable, tasteful lobby. From there, each professional was allowed to decorate their office in their own individual style, allowing for a more personal, intimate counseling environment.

Almeida Vaquero said clients appreciate the effort, with many telling her they start to feel more at ease as soon as they walk in The Counseling Group's doors.

That leads to a lot of good word-of-mouth, and referrals are a major way the therapists are assigned new patients. Almeida Vaquero said patients also come in through insurance company or court referrals – she works closely with the family courts on parenting cases – and the Group's website.

Whenever a new patient calls, Almeida Vaquero said, they go through a initial screening, then set up an appointment with the appropriate professional. Patients of all ages are accepted, and The Counseling Group makes special efforts to put young children at ease by bringing them toys to play with and letting them pick a gift from the office's "treasure chest" after their sessions.

It's all part of what Almeida Vaquero sees as a very patient-centric approach. That's another vision all The Counseling Group's therapists share, she said – and it is perhaps the most important one of all.

"We want patients to be able to achieve their goals and solve their problems as quickly as possible. We provide them as much support as possible, whatever that may mean."



Photo courtesy The Counseling Group

Silvia Almeida Vaquero, a Key Biscayne resident for 15 years, is one of the driving forces behind The Counseling Group in The Roads. The business offers a multi-disciplinary approach to mental health, and is looking to join forces with medical professionals from Key Biscayne.