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— Kris Carr, actress-turned-author

Wellness warriors

The new Carrie Bradshaws are well versed in self-help and New Age spirituality, and their messages is falling on eager ears

BY ALLEN SALKIN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The dream used to be different. Four years ago, noon would have found Gabrielle Bernstein on her way to lunch at the Soho House with a potential client of the public relations agency she co-owned. By night, she was throwing back Patron tequila at Cielo, the Coral Room or another of the downtown clubs she represented.

Her occupation has changed. On a Tuesday earlier this month at noon, Bernstein, 29, was perched on a meditation blanket in a yoga studio on West 13th Street, easing into 45 minutes of silent contemplation.

That night in her apartment in Greenwich Village, she anointed her hands in fragrant oil and, using a mixture of phrases gleaned from self-help books, meditation exercises and inspirational music, led seven young women seated on saffron and red pillows through nearly two hours of spiritual life-coaching.

"Hang out in the light," she told the women, all in their 20s and early 30s, quoting from her forthcoming book, *Add More ing to Your Life*. "Take action once a day to do something that ignites your life."

You could call Bernstein, who no longer eats red meat or drinks, a life coach, meditation guide or New Age therapist. But the clients who pay US\$180 for four weekly sessions are more likely to call her guru.

"A lot of women look up to her," said Jennifer Fragleasso, 31, who joined Bernstein's group in January. "We need this guidance and we are searching for this guidance."

A decade ago, young women like Bernstein might have been expected to chase the lifestyle of high heels and pink drinks at rooftop bars of the meatpacking district. But now there is a new role model for New York's former Carrie Bradshaws — young women who are vegetarian, well versed in self-help and New Age spirituality, and who are finding a way to make a living preaching to eager audiences, mostly female.

Bernstein is one of a circle of such figures, influenced less by the oeuvre of Candace Bushnell than that of Marianne Williamson, the spiritual lecturer who wrote *A Course in Miracles*, and by other books of pop self-actualization like *The Secret*, *Eat, Pray, Love* and even *Skinny Bitch*.

SILVER LINING

One of the most prominent is Kris Carr, a former actress who a month after appearing in two beer commercials during the Super Bowl in 2003 was found to have cancer in her liver and lungs. She went on a voyage of self-transformation that she chronicled in a documentary, *Crazy Sexy Cancer*, which aired on TLC in 2007, and was followed by two books.

Her Web site, Crazy Sexy Life, has become a nexus for women who identify themselves as leaders of a new generation of self-empowerment. Bloggers for the site include Rory Freedman, an author of the *Skinny Bitch* diet guides; Bernstein; and Mallika Chopra, a parenting author whose father is Deepak Chopra.

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eat right, to exercise, to tap into their spirituality, to start listening to themselves, and to do it in a way that's bold and resonates," Carr, 38, said by phone from her home in Woodstock, New York.

The last few weeks in Carr's life demonstrate her newfound stature. She celebrated her birthday and wedding anniversary in New Mexico before heading to San Francisco to speak with magazine editors at VegNews. Then it was on to Los Angeles for meetings about a television show she is developing. She ended the trip in Boston, where she gave the keynote address at a conference of the Association of Physicians Assistants in Oncology.

Other self-styled young gurus focus less on diet and more on spirituality. Before she began counseling other women, Jennifer Macaluso-Gilmore was a hand and foot model with alcohol, financial and relationship problems. After three people close to her, including her mother, died within months of one another in 1999, she wrote a one-woman show about coping, *Making the Best of It*, which attracted strong reviews. Her career picked up, she gave up drinking, and she married a man she had previously been keeping at a distance.

Soon friends were asking how she managed to turn her life around. She offered advice from some of the "600 self-help books" she said she has read. She decided to organize a class at her apartment. "Three friends showed up," Macaluso-Gilmore said. "And a week

later there were nine women, and seven years later I have seen over 700."

She charges US\$100 an hour for private sessions. The core of her message, she said, is, "When you step out into the unknown anything is possible in your life."

Macaluso-Gilmore's meeting space in Midtown is decorated with framed collages of thank-you letters from women who have attended her sessions. "Some of them call me an oracle," said Macaluso-Gilmore, 36. "Some call me a guru. But I'm just a girl like anyone else."

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

The new wave offered up a few playful names for themselves — "the Charlie's Angels of Wellness," "Spiritual Cowgirls" and "Spiritual Superheroines." It's clear they are proffering guidance at a time when urban women like themselves are eager for it. Thomas Amelio, managing director of the New York Open Center, which has offered classes on self-transformation for 25 years, said that he has noticed far more women in their early and mid-20s signing up for classes on meditation, shamanism and Ayurvedic healing than ever before. Many started with yoga but have moved on. "They are looking for something that is functional and practical that makes life easier to deal with," he said.

Some more established self-help and spiritualist leaders are skeptical of the Spiritual Cowgirls. Esther Hicks, who co-wrote a series of books explaining "the law of attraction" said she is dubious of those who preach a hodge-podge

of philosophies.

"When they mix what we're teaching with other stuff that doesn't work, people get confused," Hicks said.

Patrick Williams, the founder of the Institute for Life Coach Training, which certifies life coaches, said untrained coaches probably won't cause any harm, but they may not do much good.

"A good coach has learned to elicit a client's best thinking and to have the client say what they haven't said, dream what they have not dreamed, think what they have not thought about," Williams said. "You ask more questions than you give answers."

But the adherents of these young female gurus continue to swear by — and even emulate — them.

Ilana Arazie, who used to produce a video blog about her dating life, Downtown Diary, discontinued it after becoming a client of Macaluso-Gilmore. She is preparing to start a new blog, Downtown Dharma, about spiritual pursuits in Manhattan. "You don't want to be stuck in that role of being the single girl," Arazie, 34, said. "You need to look at your life as holistic."

Sera Beak, 33, the author of *The Red Book: A Deliciously Unorthodox Approach to Igniting Your Divine Spark*, is working on a documentary about women like herself. "We like to have a relationship and a career, but we know this internal search is a priority, too," she said. "It's one of the most important things you can do as young woman. You don't have to wait until you are middle aged."



ILLUSTRATION: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Perhaps nothing in medicine more aptly depicts the paradoxical statement "doing better, feeling worse" than high blood pressure. Despite an extraordinarily easy way to detect it, strong evidence for how to prevent it and proven remedies to treat it, more Americans today have undetected or poorly controlled hypertension than ever before.

The aging of the population is a reason but not the only one, said Aram Chobanian, a hypertension expert at Boston University Medical Center. As he summarized the problem in an interview and in *The New England Journal of Medicine* last month, Americans are too sedentary and fat. They eat too much, especially salt, but too few potassium-rich fruits and vegetables.

The makers of processed and fast foods created and persistently promote a craving for high-salt foods, even in school lunch programs. And Americans without health insurance often don't know that their blood pressure is too high because they wait for a calamity to strike before seeking medical care.

Solutions to the blood pressure problem require broad-scale approaches — by the public, by government, by industry and by health care professionals. Several measures are similar to those that have been so effective in curbing cigarette smoking; others require better, affordable access to medical care for everyone at risk, including children and the unemployed.

Still others need the cooperation of government, industry and the public to improve the American diet and enhance opportunities for health-promoting exercise.

No one claims that the solutions are cheap. But failure to fix this problem portends even greater costs down the line, because uncontrolled hypertension sets the stage for astronomically expensive heart and kidney disease and stroke — diseases that will become only more common as the population ages.

DOING THE NUMBERS

Once, the prevailing medical opinion was that lowering an elevated blood pressure was hazardous because it would deprive a person's vital organs of an adequate blood supply. But a few pioneering medical researchers thought otherwise and eventually showed that lowering high blood pressure could prevent heart attacks, heart failure, strokes and kidney disease — and save lives.

Even then, it was long thought that the only important indicator was diastolic pressure — the bottom number, representing the pressure in arteries between heartbeats. Further studies showed that the larger top number, systolic pressure, representing arterial pressure when the heart beats, was also medically important.

And as the various studies reached fruition, it became apparent that the long-accepted numbers for desirable blood pressure were too high to protect long-term health.

[HEALTH]



PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Too much salt takes a high toll on blood pressure

Sedentary lifestyles, expanding waistlines and high salt intake increase risk of hypertension

BY JANE E. BRODY
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



A customer adds salt to her chips. Recent research has challenged the commonly accepted range of desirable blood pressure.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

concerned about the fact that so much high blood pressure is not controlled," he said, and called "therapeutic inertia" an important reason.

It is not enough for doctors to write a prescription and tell patients to return for a check-up in six months, he said. Rather, a working partnership between health care professionals and patients is needed to encourage people to monitor their pressure, adopt protective habits and continue to take medication that effectively lowers pressure.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Diuretics are a first-line and inexpensive remedy, but many patients with hypertension also need other drugs to lower pressures to a desirable level.

Chobanian, whose *New England Journal* report was titled "The Hypertension Paradox: More Uncontrolled Disease Despite Improved Therapy," noted that "in the majority of patients, two or more antihypertensive drugs are required to achieve target blood-pressure levels." In the interview, he emphasized the detrimental role played by diets high in salt and calories and low in protective fruits and vegetables — a result of portions that are too large, and of too many fast and processed foods that rely on salt to enhance flavor. "Generally, the average person in our society consumes more than 10g of salt a day," Chobanian said, "but the Institute of Medicine recommends a third of this amount as optimal."

A new RAND Corp study finds that a one-third reduction in salt consumption could save US\$18 billion a year in direct medical costs. Chobanian called for better food labeling; changes in foods served in cafeterias, restaurants and schools; and less advertising on children's television of unhealthy foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Also needed are better opportunities for all people to get regular exercise. "We have to focus more on children," he said. "They're the ones who will be getting cardiovascular diseases in the future."