NOT ALONE

FOR NEARLY 25 YEARS, LILI PENKOWER HELPED STUDENTS WORK THROUGH IT

BY HATTIE FLETCHER

As director of the Medical Student Counseling Program from its start in 1980 until her retirement in July, Lili Penkower knew more than a third of medical students at the University of Pittsburgh rather well. Often she learned things about them known by no one else—including their teachers, parents, close friends, and even romantic partners. When she saw these students around campus, however, she had to pretend they were strangers; a simple greeting might have undermined her effectiveness.

Penkower, a slender woman who doesn’t look old enough for retirement, was a model of discretion. Her office, where you’d find comfortable couches and a dish of chocolates on the coffee table, was tucked away in a nondescript building on Fifth Avenue, off a medical student's normal path. She didn't want anyone to worry about being spotted on the way into or out of a session.

Despite her remote location, Penkower, who radiates enthusiasm and empathy in equal measure, had a strong presence on campus. She introduced herself to students during orientation and helped them anticipate the kinds of problems they might encounter. She also led a couples’ meeting to discuss the impact medical school can have on relationships.

When students sought help with problems, she accommodated their schedules, taking more than her fair share of distraught, middle-of-the-night phone calls.

In Penkower’s lexicon, “problem” means “anything getting in the way of the work students came to medical school to do.”

At most medical schools, students seeking help head to the university’s general counseling service. At Pitt, the program is tailored to med students’ needs.

The issues she helped students deal with were typical for any 20-something population. They ranged from eating disorders and depression to family issues; these were often compounded by the pressures of academic life and staggering student loan burdens. She says one of her biggest jobs was helping overwhelmed students see that their problems had solutions. She never let a student walk out of her office without feeling a bit of hope.

One student, who asks to remain anonymous, thought she had a good handle on medical school and a strong support system—she was enjoying the experience tremendously. Then one day she hit a wall and found herself barely able to drag herself to school, though she ended up at an adviser’s office. He immediately called Penkower, who met with the student that day and regularly throughout the next two months. Soon, the young woman was back on track.

“I honestly do not know what I would have done without her,” the student says now. “I don't think I would have been able to bounce back into third year. She saved me.”

Penkower showed students that their problems had solutions.

Penkower tenet: You should learn to take care of yourself before beginning a career that requires you to care for others.

During her years at Pitt, Penkower was a graduate student (she earned an MSW in 1974 and a PhD in epidemiology in 1986), researcher (focusing most recently on adolescent transplant recipients), and (to the surprise of some students who first came to know her in the Fifth Avenue office) a class instructor. Among her titles: assistant professor of family medicine and psychiatry. She worked with various student groups on peer counseling projects, hotlines, and wellness programs.

Still, the student counseling, which she calls “the best thing I’ve ever done,” always came first.

Penkower has moved to California, to be closer to family. She knows the program is in capable hands. Lee Wolfson, the new director, had filled in for Penkower during vacations. Wolfson, who has focused his recent career on depression in geriatric patients, enjoyed the experience of working with med students so much that when Penkower returned from a trip to Los Angeles last winter, he jokingly told her to keep him in mind if she ever decided to retire, not realizing she had been house hunting. Now he’s working with students full-time.

And Penkower envies him that, a little. But she’s giving herself some time to figure out what to do next—while learning how to deal with the stress of L.A. traffic.