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Clay Cockrell:  
Therapy In The Park

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# Clay Cockrell: Going That Extra Mile For Patients

*Using Central Park as a backdrop,  
UK grad offers 'Walk and Talk Therapy'*

By Beverly K. Bell

In the beginning, it was just rock and mud; a swampy parcel of land bordered by what is now 59th and 106th Streets, between Fifth and Eighth Avenues.

But Central Park's designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, envisioned something else. Along with British architect Calvert Vaux, Olmsted imagined a refuge for stressed-out New Yorkers. He believed that nothing could cure the ills of the psyche and the spirit like a walk in the park.

Now, psychotherapist Clay Cockrell is proving Olmsted's theory. With a unique brand of therapy, the University of Kentucky graduate is getting his patients up off the traditional couch and outdoors, helping them work through their problems while strolling in America's premier urban sanctuary.

This is not your mother's psychotherapy. Forget the subdued lighting and the floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Instead, think Strawberry Fields and Shakespeare Garden. With Central Park's American elms as the canopy and a Balto statue as the backdrop, "Walk and Talk Therapy" represents a new twist in an established profession.

"When I have to go indoors and meet with a client because of weather, it's a completely different session," Cockrell says. "It's almost as if the two should not be called the same thing — therapy."

Cockrell had every intention of becoming a typical therapist, even though there were clues that something a little more eclectic might be in store for the 1995 graduate. Kids who grow up in small towns like Mount Sterling, Ky., don't normally end up living in the real-life Gotham.

But two years after earning his master's in social work at UK, he did just that, moving to New York City. With his deep interest in acting — he had a minor in theater from his undergraduate days at Asbury College — the 39-year-old Kentucky native had always planned to go

there. When he married fellow UK alumna and aspiring actress Sandy Harper, the relocation seemed inevitable.

The couple thrived, she an active partner in their joint theater company (see page 13) and he growing his private practice. Then, one day, a patient couldn't get away from his job for his mid-day appointment with Cockrell. The commute time, the session itself, the trip back to the office — were too much. When Cockrell's wife suggested he go to the client and conduct the session during the man's lunch hour while walking in nearby Central Park, Cockrell resisted.

"My immediate reaction was 'no, you can't do that,'" Cockrell recalls. But after mulling it over, he couldn't come up with a good reason why *not*. He offered the alternative to the patient, who grabbed the opportunity. Slowly, other clients opted for the walking therapy sessions, as well. And something started to happen. Patients, who hadn't been able to progress in their treatment, began breaking through and making headway.

Walking forward in one of New York's parks became a metaphor for moving forward in their lives.

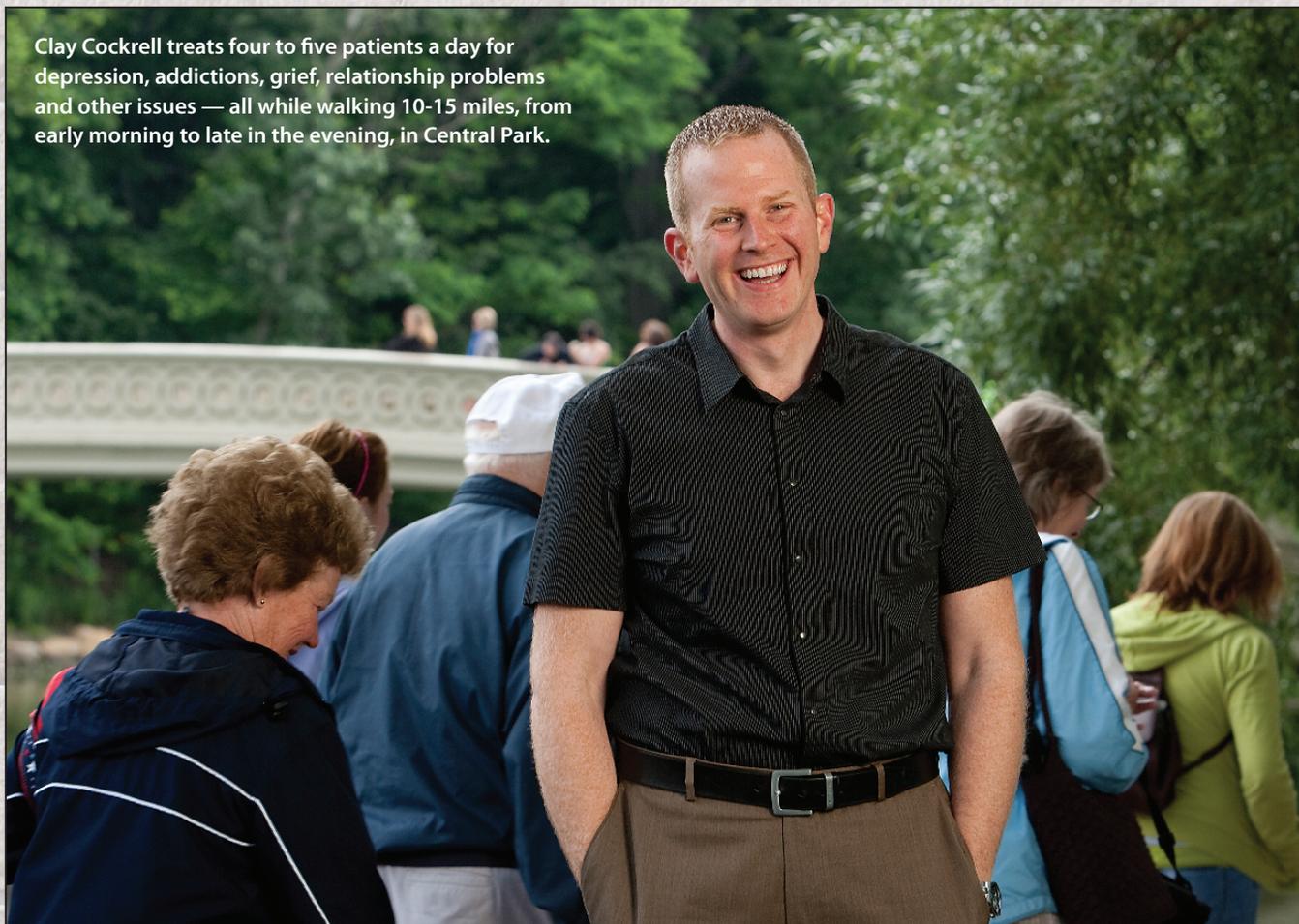
"They say that every memory you've ever had is stored within all of your cells," Cockrell explains. When people become physically active, everything comes to life — experiences, emotions, self-awareness. The body triggers the mind and the healing.

It took several years, but eventually Cockrell transitioned his entire practice to walk and talk therapy in 2005. He now treats four to five patients a day for depression, addictions, grief, relationship problems and other issues; all while walking 10-15 miles, from early morning to late in the evening. Occasionally he has sessions in Battery Park for his "Wall Street guys," but most of his counseling takes place in Central Park. His practice has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and on "Good Morning America" and CNN.com.



Photos © 2009 Steve Hochstein

Clay Cockrell treats four to five patients a day for depression, addictions, grief, relationship problems and other issues — all while walking 10-15 miles, from early morning to late in the evening, in Central Park.



### From Traditional Roots To Innovation In The City

It's no surprise that Cockrell is making a name for himself. This is a man who believes in the highest of standards for his profession. He learned that lesson from one of his UK professors, Dr. Janet Ford, who taught him statistics. "She saw social work as an honorable field. You need to go into it for the right reasons," Cockrell says.

Another teacher, Dr. Surjit Dhooper, helped Cockrell understand the history of social work, how it was born and how it developed. Cockrell also appreciated how Dhooper, who is Muslim, broadened the perspective of this small-town Kentucky student who had little exposure to cultural diversity. "He was just a wonderful social work teacher...a fascinating man to get to know."

Despite his success, Cockrell acknowledges that his practice is unusual. In fact, he estimates that there are only a handful of therapists in the country who use the walk and talk approach. The reasons they don't are as varied as New Yorkers themselves.

Traditional roots run strong through the profession. Watch one episode of HBO's *"In Treatment,"* with its muted colors and stereotypical couch and the message is clear: this is how therapy is supposed to be done.

Another explanation might be that many cities aren't large enough to ensure privacy. There's an anonymity to New York City that makes walk and talk therapy possible. With more than eight million other residents, Cockrell's patients don't have to worry about running into a friend or acquaintance, and if they do, it's unlikely they would know Cockrell.

"In Mt. Sterling, if people saw me walking with somebody, they would say ...'there's Clay Cockrell and he's got a patient,' and then confidentiality would be breached," he explains. "Here, nobody has any idea that when they pass us they're watching a therapy session in action."

Also, there may be less of a stigma attached to mental health treatment in New York. Often, residents have few qualms in seeking out what they need – nutritionists, personal trainers, nannies and therapists.

Finally, unlike other places, the city itself can be an ally in successful treatment. Cockrell's clients are able to look at themselves in the much broader context of America's largest city. "They say a lot of therapy is navel gazing," Cockrell says. But sitting in a room, picking oneself apart in relative isolation is not how this therapy works. Instead, it demands engagement and movement, to get out in the world and recognize one's place in it.

### Paying The Price

Pardon the pun, but this kind of therapy is not a walk in the park. "I didn't realize just how difficult it was going to be to walk all day long, to be in a counseling relationship and be so mentally engaged," Cockrell says. "Then, to add on top of it, I'm walking eight, sometimes 10 hours a day. It's exhausting. A lot of other therapists are just unwilling to do that."

It's mid-January and New York City, along with the rest of the Northeast, has been hit with a brutal cold front. Temperatures

plummet below zero at night and reach only the low teens during the day. Snow flurries blowing, wind whipping, Cockrell pushes on. He pulls the new shearling coat up around his neck, as he walks beside and listens to his patient who is somehow invigorated by the frigid weather. Both men exhale, their warm breath dissolving as soon as it hits the brittle air.

For all the benefits of the unique counseling, Cockrell does pay a physical price. Yes, he has lost 20 pounds. His cholesterol and blood pressure are also down. But he suffers from sore feet and frequent blisters. With his fair skin and reddish blonde hair, he can't escape wind and harmful rays, even with hefty and multiple applications of sunscreen. He won't wear sunglasses because he doesn't want to put any barriers between him and his patient. As a result, bright days can leave him with severe headaches. And walking for fun? Forget about it. "We don't go on vacation to go hiking," he says. "We go on vacation to sit on a beach."

On a beautiful spring day, Cockrell heads out for another session in Central Park. He does have a "bricks and mortar" location in Manhattan, but this is his real office: 843 acres, seven bodies of water, 21 playgrounds, 26,000 trees. Few people realize that Central Park is completely man-made. Workers blasted boulders and moved tons of earth and stone over 20 years to create the landscape jewel of the Northeast.

Cockrell can relate to this heavy lifting. That's exactly what his clients do — excavate the disappointment, pain, and yes, even dirt, to gain a fuller, richer life. Over the course of their treatment, his patients will wander past some of the 9,000 benches and 51 sculptures, finding their way through the great, grassy expanse and personal issues.

### More Unconventional Therapy

And 500 miles away, in Cockrell's hometown, some who knew him might describe him as daring, picking up his belongings and

building a life so far away from everything familiar. But if the child reveals the adult, hints of Cockrell's life direction were there all along. His favorite television program growing up was *"The Bob Newhart Show"* whose main character was an unflappable and likeable psychologist. In high school, Cockrell discovered an interest in acting, which he pursued in college with a minor in theater arts. He enjoyed creating a character and understanding the motivation. Even as a young boy, he was always a good listener and loved trying to figure out why people behaved the way they did. And a nickname his great uncle still calls him? Cassius,

after Kentucky's famous abolitionist, Cassius Marcellus Clay. Many words have been used to describe Mr. Clay, but probably the most common is unconventional.

For his part, Cockrell is taking his unorthodox thinking to the next step in [www.onlinepsychotherapy.com](http://www.onlinepsychotherapy.com), which allows patients to receive face-to-face counseling from him, using video-teleconferencing mechanisms such as Skype and iChat. It's just one more tool Cockrell has created to get people the treatment they need and when they need it.

In 1852, Olmsted's first book, *"Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England,"* was published. Now a century and a half later, the renowned landscape architect and the Kentucky-born psychologist are connected by a park and a coincidental title. American poet Wallace Stevens once wrote that, "... the truth depends on a walk around a lake." Perhaps this is what Cockrell is doing with his special kind of therapy, helping patients find their own personal truth — one step at a time.

Beverly K. Bell is a freelance writer in Lexington.

**"Here, nobody has any idea that when they pass us they're watching a therapy session in action."  
— Clay Cockrell**



Watch video of Clay Cockrell in Central Park at [www.ukalumni.net](http://www.ukalumni.net), keyword: Cockrell

## Fun Times In The City

"I like good stories," Clay Cockrell says.

And clearly, he and wife, UK alumna Sandy Harper Cockrell, are pursuing those stories with passion and perseverance. Four years ago, they formed J City Theater, a production company located in Jersey City, N.J., where they live, directly across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Clay serves as executive producer and Sandy is the artistic director.

While both graduated from UK — she earned a master's in theater in 1981 with an emphasis on directing — they started dating when both lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was working in a substance abuse center, pursuing his master's degree through UK's satellite campus at Northern Kentucky University. She was earning her MFA from the University of Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.

Now, with their own company, they have the opportunity to stage the shows that most interest them. These have included *"A Tuna Christmas," "The God Committee,"*

and *"J.B.,"* the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Archibald MacLeish. The company has its own Web site at [www.jcity.org](http://www.jcity.org)

Clay Cockrell has even been able to translate some of his theatrical experiences to his therapy sessions. Using lines from plays or movies, stressing the importance of nourishing the artistic side, even facing fears like those resulting from auditions and on-stage performances — all of these can be helpful anecdotes for his patients.

"I remember watching, *'The Queen'* with Helen Mirren, and at one point, Queen Elizabeth says, 'I think better on my feet,' and I thought, I should use that quote!"

