

# Portland Press Herald

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## Maine at Work: Aye, there's the rub: No pain is gain for clients after massage therapy

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Staff Writer

PORTLAND - Walter Selens was standing in the lobby of his **massage** therapy practice on Forest Avenue, explaining that his main focus is on using **massage** to help people get a wider range of motion or relief from pain.



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Reporter Ray Routhier, right, learns about massage therapy from Walter Selens in Portland. Selens has been a licensed massage therapist for 22 years.

Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

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### THIS WEEK'S JOB

**TITLE:** Massage therapist at A Bout of Health, Forest Avenue, Portland.

**WORKER:** Walter Selens, 46, of Westbrook.

**HOURS:** 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. three days a week; 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. two days a week.

**SALARY:** Varies depending on number of clients, but usually between \$35,000 and \$40,000 annually.

**DUTIES:** Using massage techniques and tools to help clients with injuries or ailments get relief from pain and/or a larger range of motion; taking a variety of measurements to see how a patient's posture or alignment changes over time.

**SURPRISING FACTS:** Selens mostly works with people trying to recover from an injury or battling a recurring ailment, while some massage therapists solely do massages intended to relax someone. Next week, Oct. 24-30, is National Massage Therapy Awareness Week. To learn more about massage therapy, go to the web site of the American Massage Therapy Association: [www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org).

**PERKS:** Gaining an encyclopedic knowledge of the body's skeletal and muscular systems; getting to see people get better because of your touch.

### **ABOUT THIS SERIES**

**MAINE AT WORK** takes an interactive look at iconic, visible or just plain interesting jobs done by folks in Maine. Reporter Ray Routhier shadows a worker or workers, reports what he sees and tries his hand at some of the job's duties.

**IF YOU'D LIKE** to suggest a job to be explored in this feature, e-mail [rrouthier@pressherald.com](mailto:rrouthier@pressherald.com) or call 791-6454.

What he does most of the time, he told me, does not fit in with the popular image of massages given to stressed-out executives on vacation at a spa. It's more like physical therapy, but without weights and machines.

The difference between the stereotype and what Selens does didn't fully hit me until I met his next patient.

Nelson Bellerose, 62, had been struck on the head and shoulder by a solidified lime deposit while working (he doesn't want to say where) in 1993. The injuries to his brain and shoulder have left him in almost constant pain -- a burning headache is part of it -- and left his body out of whack.

But since he began coming to Selens in May, Bellerose has begun to get some relief. He often feels better after his one-hour massage sessions with Selens, but then begins to feel bad again before he comes back, he said.

"It's like two steps forward, one step back," said Bellerose, of Limington. "I can see that over time, this is helping. I had been looking for this kind of help for a long time, but finally a friend referred me to Walter."

Selens said other people who treated Bellerose over the years focused on his brain injury. But as a massage therapist, he focuses on muscles and soft tissue in the shoulder and back, as well as the head.

### **FINDING PROBLEM AREAS**

The first thing Selens did with Bellerose at his appointment was have him take off his shirt, then have him stand against a giant sheet of graph paper against the wall.

Selens compared how straight Bellerose was to a picture taken several months earlier. It showed that he was indeed straighter, but the shoulder where he got hit was still higher and larger than his other shoulder.

Then Bellerose sat on the massage table and Selens did an "assessment" by feeling his back and shoulders to see what muscles felt tight, and where problem areas might be.

And this is where his knowledge of the body's skeletal and muscular systems came in.

"See, feel this here -- it feels like a knot, or a thump, but that's a muscle that's supposed to be there," Selens said. "People sometimes think every knot or thump they feel means muscles are too tight, but it's not the case."

Selens had me feel various areas on Bellerose's back. As he did, he listed a dozen or more bones and muscles that intersected at various points, and explained what each one does.

Then he had Bellerose lie down. Supporting Bellerose's head and neck with one hand, he began to run his fingers through Bellerose's hair. At least, that's what it looked like at first.

Then I looked more closely.

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm actually pulling his hair, very gently," Selens replied. He said that by pulling the hair, he was moving and stretching connective tissue inside the head.

Selens started using his fingers to rub small circles along Bellerose's scalp, also moving tissue. He then had me trade places with him. I sat on a little stool, supported Bellerose's head with my left hand, and began rubbing little circles with my left hand.

### **BASKETBALL PLAYER HANDS**

I was a little worried about how much pressure to apply, since Bellerose had sustained a brain injury. But I remembered that Selens told me any amount of pressure or touch can have a therapeutic effect. That's because a physical touch basically sends more signals to the brain than pain does, Selens said.

Also, I began to realize that in a job like this, it probably takes some time to get used to touching other people. I was definitely a little uncomfortable rubbing someone else's head.

But because Bellerose trusts Selens, he also seemed to trust me. And that relaxed me.

"What he's doing right now is very soothing," Bellerose said to Selens about my massage technique. So I tried to keep doing the same thing for as long as I could before turning the session back over to Selens.

Selens has been doing massage therapy for more than 22 years, is licensed by the state, and has several certifications.

He also has very big hands. Huge basketball player hands. When I noticed this, he held his hand to mine, and it was almost double the size.

"I tell people that with hands like this, I was either going to be a massage therapist or the bass player for a punk rock band," he said.

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