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COLUMN ONE

Where the Rich Go to Cry

■ A former Hollywood agent and the former head of AOL Time Warner team up on a mental health spa for the frazzled elite.

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Special to The Times

For those who knew Gerald Levin as the almost Machiavellian 80-hour-a-week chief executive of AOL Time Warner, it will be hard to imagine him as he was this summer in a boat off the Caribbean island of Bimini. When a group of dolphins came swimming by, Levin, although not a great swimmer, donned his snorkel and jumped in.

"It was an unbelievable metaphysical experience. You're entering their world," says Levin softly.

As he recalls the moment, his voice is modulated to just above a whisper. He is calm and calming, with a shock of white hair, a white beard, and a demure blue checked shirt and chinos. "You feel blissful. A lot of people would cry, but not out of sadness."

Levin dived in at the instigation of Laurie Perlman, a former agent at Creative Artists Agency who was testing alternative mental health treatments.



Perlman, who is in her early 50s, is founder and chief executive of Moonview Sanctuary, a new high-end clinic for the rich and, often, famous. It is a kind of psyche-spa for the burned out, the depressed and the anxious elite who want total anonymity and are willing to pay \$175,000 a year for the latest innovations in mental health — no insurance accepted.

Levin, 66, is not a client. He is a "spiritual advisor" at the clinic and Perlman's romantic partner. The two met when Perlman sought him out as a possible board member. Levin had just lost a bitter corporate battle and left AOL Time Warner in 2002. He told CNN that he wanted to put the "poetry" back in his life.

There is at least visual poetry at his office at Moonview, in a lush building in Santa Monica. It is an expansive suite of soothing earth-tone spaces, all carefully anointed by Perlman with

\$60,000 in art and antiques from Bali: a 6-foot-high drum, Rousseau-like paintings of verdant jungles, a plow that's been turned into a bookshelf.

The facility is preternaturally cool, and it's quiet except for the tinkling of a fountain fashioned from a white marble Buddha.

Moonview always feels empty, though that's because all scheduling has been arranged so no client ever runs into another client.

In his years as a corporate titan, Levin never tried any sort of counseling, but now he has tested many of the treatments Moonview offers. "I'm a great object lesson," he says. "How are we going to get clients to overcome their fears?" As with the dolphins. "I had fear. But once I got in, I couldn't wait."

Moonview offers a dizzying array of 60 specialists, offering Western and Eastern medicine, traditional psychia-

try, psychopharmacology, talk therapy, neuro-feedback, high-tech scans that study brain waves, chiropractic services, acupuncture, reflexology, art therapy, equine therapy and more. The practitioners include UCLA professors and veterans of some of the well-regarded local rehabilitation facilities, as well as shamans and psychics.

Perlman's specialty is life after life, which can be more prosaically described as talking to the dead. Moonview also offers specialized services for those in legal trouble and their families. Indeed, Moonview will tackle a client's whole support system, including the complicated web of relationships that keep a star going.

"This whole place was designed because when I was an agent, I saw people implode from high media exposure," says Perlman, who represented Madonna back in the pop icon's "Lucky Star" days.

Perlman officially launched Moonview a year ago and has poured \$2 million into the venture. Perlman, who earned her psychology doctorate from Ryokan College, a local nonaccredited program, doesn't position herself as the sanctuary guru — she insists that Moonview be run as a collective, with all major decisions reached by a consensus of the core staff.

But she does know celebrities. "Let's say somebody takes a tumble," Perlman says. "That tumble ignites a huge damage cycle, whether it's their concert schedule, or TV series, or their movie shooting, or their constituency, or their shareholders. They want privacy and a comprehensive team. It's almost a pit crew approach to be able to get them fortified and back on track."

Although Moonview isn't suited to those who need hospitalization, it can treat a range of patients, says its medical director, Terry Eagan, a psychiatrist and a former chief resident of psychiatry at USC. They include people suffering from mental health issues such as "depression, anxiety, panic disorders, insomnia, pain disorders." Yet they can also help "patients with difficulty functioning in their world. Not

that their brain isn't working ... their way of interacting with their world is just not working."

Like a former alcoholic who acts as a rehab counselor, Levin is a former power junkie on hand to help clients sort through their high-powered lives.

Rise to the Top

Levin burst onto the national business scene in 1975 by orchestrating a satellite distribution deal for HBO, a move that saved the company and ultimately launched the cable revolution. He went on to leapfrog his corporate rivals to rise to the top of Time Warner and to lead the company's purchase of CNN and the Ted Turner companies and, ultimately, its ill-fated acquisition by AOL. Many Time Warner employees blame him for the subsequent decimation of the company's 401(k) plan and still speak of his reign bitterly.

In 1997, his 31-year-old son, Jonathan, an English teacher in one of New York's worst public schools, was killed by one of his students. It shattered Levin, who retreated into work, which he described as his great "narcotic."

He's blunt about what he used to be like. In his former incarnation as master of the universe, Levin says, "I lived through resumes. You only mattered to me based on what you did and did it relate to me, not who are you really.

"You couldn't get an emotional response from me. I was so protective. Frankly, at the end, after being an accomplished or skillful navigator of a corporate system, I lost it completely. It was after 9/11." His college roommate was dying of cancer. "I couldn't be the political person that seemed to be required."

He still sounds somewhat amazed that Perlman contacted him about Moonview. "There's nothing in the public record to show that I had an aptitude or commitment to public health," he says.

They talked over a period of months, and Levin liked hearing Perlman's ideas about death and dying. Perlman says they have contacted

Levin's dead son, though she doesn't specify how. One of the center's practitioners is a medium who is said to contact the dead on behalf of clients who are interested, though this is not one of Moonview's standard treatments.

Eventually Perlman and Levin's relationship turned romantic. He left his wife of more than 30 years and moved to Los Angeles to be with Perlman. (They are not married because his divorce is not final, but they had a commitment ceremony and wear rings.) He ultimately joined the treatment team at the clinic.

"I felt my own life experience could be helpful to other people, not only because of the death of my son, although there is so much about that," Levin says. "Like a lot of people who get caught up in what they're doing, you grieve, but you don't understand or deal with it.

"I'm like an object lesson. I'm a poster child for maybe where they should go. I'm holding out my hand."

While some in Hollywood snicker almost reflexively when they hear about Levin's latest venture, Leo Hindery, a friend and former president of ATT Broadband, says he's happy that Levin has finally found some peace

"It's very much a transformation," Hindery says. "Jerry had the tragedy of Jonathan's passing, and one of the biggest and most controversial transactions in the history of the media industry, which goes from being a great accolade to being just pilloried by one and all. That's hard to take at the end of your career."

An Open House

Last spring, Moonview held an open house for the powerhouse talent agency where Perlman once worked. Noshing on tuna sashimi and drinking mango-flavored water, suited corporate warriors circulated through the clinic, listening to the specialists. In one buttery yellow hall festooned with Balinese instruments, a neuropsychologist lectured on medication and psychotherapy not being enough when

treating conditions such as bipolar disorder or depression.

Down the hall, amid a room full of orchids and crystals, a sex therapist talked about sexuality not being restricted to the genitals.

For those who actually attend Moonview, the program begins with a 15-day, intensive 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. private regimen. Clients who don't live in the area are put up at luxury hotels — either Shutters or Casa del Mar in Santa Monica — and provided a 24-hour therapeutic buddy, as well as bodyguards and chauffeurs. They start with a complete physical and psychiatric evaluation and a scan known as a quantitative electroencephalogram, which assesses the patient's brain function. (The latter process is repeated throughout a patient's stay to assess the efficacy of treatments.)

During the first three days, each patient also gets an hour of neuro-feedback a day, a process that Perlman likens to "calisthenics for the brain."

"It opens up the plasticity of the brain and addresses areas where the brain might need assistance," she says.

"You'll have an evaluation on your intimates and how you feel comforted," adds Perlman, as well as an assessment of the issue a person wants to confront, whether it be anger management or family conflict or marital issues.

In the initial stay, the clients might see many of the practitioners until a customized treatment plan is devised, then return quarterly for two- to three-day intensive sessions and continue throughout the year with treatment regimens.

"Throughout the year, there's a designed program for that individual," says Perlman. "If they need a recipe of art therapy, body work, 12-step meetings and physiotherapy, that recipe is designed for that person. If they need nutrition, craniosacral massages and EMDR [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing], that recipe is designed for that person, and it changes as the year progresses."

Moonview also tries to explicitly incorporate spirituality into the treat-

ment plan.

"It's not sectarian," says Eagan, the son of a minister. "Some of it comes in the form of the 12 steps, some of it in a more existential idea of faith. Many people have abandoned the religion of their youth and never found something to pick up in its stead, and have an emptiness or hole that they can't fill up with psychology or analysis or relationships or drugs or alcohol. Our goal is to help them look at what they discarded and how they may be able to bring it back into their lives."

Moonview works with an array of religious people, medical director Eagan says, including Catholic priests, Buddhist monks and a Native American drumming specialist, among others.

With all its good intentions, some say, Moonview caters to those with high-class problems that don't apply to the majority of Americans.

"As a business decision and a therapeutic model, it's an innovative treatment plan," says Dr. William Greenberg, a New Jersey psychiatrist who is a member of the American Psychiatric Assn. Committee on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry. "But ultimately, if 99.9% of the people can't afford it, it's not relevant."

Others wonder if Moonview runs the risk of indulging individuals who are already overindulged.

"It feeds on the whole idea of celebrity, of always being indulged, which is often the piece that is making life tough for them," says Toni Bernay, a Beverly Hills psychologist who counts among her clients Academy Award winners and Hollywood executives. "When you're always the center of attention, your reality testing goes a bit out the window, and what may work fine inside the therapeutic environment may not hold up in the real world."

Moonview declined to make any former patients available, although it did provide a contact to Matt Gallant, the host of the Animal Planet cable channel's "The Planet's Funniest Animals," who attended the clinic free as a test patient while they were trying

to figure out how the sanctuary would work.

"When you're living in a town where people feed you bull constantly, you want to hear the truth. You hear the truth here, and it's an incredible motivation," Gallant says.

Moonview also declined to say how many patients have enrolled, although Levin says "enough to validate the concept and to get us thinking about expansion."

"The idea is to go to other locations and have the same concept, but it might trend more toward end of life." Future centers — planning for a New York and Miami Moonview is already underway — would replicate the current treatment plan, but expand services to assist people and families facing death.

The hefty fees at Moonview go to subsidize a proposed nonprofit wing, whose core mission would be to conduct research.

They plan to publicly release, probably on the Internet, any findings on such innovations as the sequencing of treatments. "Even with the small sample, it can have validity," says Levin, and they've employed a mathematician to try to devise a scientifically sound assessment for small samples, applying research techniques usually reserved for physics.

One thing Levin isn't certain about is whether a year at Moonview would have made him a better chief executive.

"That's the \$64 question," he notes wryly. "If I were more grounded, I don't know if it would have enhanced the quality of the business strategic decisions — but it certainly would have made me a more pleasant person."

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