Marion Rosen describes herself as a bodyworker and physical therapist. Others call her a healer.

"I'm not a healer," said the 95-year-old Berkeley resident. "But people get well. It's not so much what I'm doing but what they allow to happen to themselves."
The Rosen Method, a style of body-centered therapy she developed over the decades, is taught and practiced around the world. It relies on gentle and direct touch to access the unconscious, where emotionally unmanageable experiences are buried - resulting in muscle tension and restricted breath. As people become more aware of the roots of their problems, they open up, and the barriers they've created begin to dissolve.

"A person's story is written on their body," said Sara Webb, Rosen's first pupil and now a senior teacher at Rosen Method: The Berkeley Center.

Rosen was born into a Jewish family in Germany in June 1914. As the Nazis gained power, she was abandoned by one gentile friend after another and grew more and more petrified. Finally, she decided to flee Europe and move to New York. She had to take an indirect route - from Sweden through Eastern Europe, Russia and Japan - and arrived first on the West Coast, where she stayed with relatives in Berkeley.

"It was June 16, 1940," recalled Rosen, sitting in the hillside home she shares with her daughter. "When I saw Berkeley, I said, 'That's it.' The beauty, the freedom - it was my kind of place. You could do anything. You could go out at midnight and hitchhike on San Pablo Avenue. I didn't do it, but I could have."

She learned physical therapy in Germany, Sweden and the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. She worked three years at Kaiser Hospital in Richmond, treating injured shipyard workers, then opened a private practice where she began, in the 1950s, to synthesize her training with her own discoveries and various somatic sources. She started teaching her approach in the early 1970s and it was named the Rosen Method in 1980, when the nonprofit Rosen Institute was founded.

She has treated tens of thousands of people and trained more teachers than she can count. She still sees clients four mornings a week, gives lectures and runs several workshops a year. Rosen Method centers have spread to more than a dozen countries, and practitioners are now being trained in Bosnia.

Although Rosen relies on a cane or walker and struggles with macular degeneration, she has no plans to retire.

"That's the last thing I think about," she said. "As long as I can work, it's such a joy."

Prominent psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo has described her as one of the "new shamans." Gloria Hessellund, Rosen's colleague and former student, called her a pioneer and a superstar in global mind-body circles.

Rosen, however, said she's simply a midwife - bringing forth what needs to come out.

"It's a way to regain part of yourself that's been suppressed," she said. "Sometimes I feel tired and grumpy, and I wish a client would cancel. By the time the session is over, I feel great. When they open up and become themselves and get in touch with their pain, all of a sudden you are a part of them."
She said some patients need only one session to make a breakthrough. Others require years. Rosen herself was 70 before she realized what it was like to feel loved - even though she knew in her head that many people loved her.

"I was very amazed," she said. "It's like something warm is bubbling up in you."

Rosen and those who practice her method say they have successfully treated asthma, migraines, arthritis and a wide range of aches and pains. Well aware that their work might come across as touchy-feely mumbo jumbo, they say it is grounded in scientific principles and common sense.

Webb said people have largely the same genetic makeup as chimpanzees, who touch each other continually, and that humans are mammals who depend on contact. Rosen noted that a body undergoing treatment forms oxytocin, a hormone that acts as a neurotransmitter.

Donna Meehan, a Rosen practitioner from El Cerrito, said, "You fall in love with everyone. They become a unique individual, and I can watch them unfold right under my hand. And now, in my relationships, I can listen to who the person really is instead of making them who I want them to be."

On Valentine's Day, Webb and Meehan led a three-hour workshop. When it was time for a demonstration, Chuck Fisher, a 63-year-old social worker from San Leandro, volunteered. Seven years ago, he'd been treated by a friend studying the Rosen Method. He said he'd been resistant and skeptical at first, but whatever had occurred during those sessions "still had a lot of importance" for him and he was ready to learn more.

For the next 20 minutes, Webb's hands traveled up and down Fisher's body, stretched out on a massage table. Webb worked slowly but surely. Unlike in massage therapy, she waited for a response from his muscles before proceeding. His face grew pinker, his breathing changed and his stomach gurgled.

Hessellund, director of teaching at several Rosen centers, had spinal problems the first time she saw Rosen.

"She asked me, 'Why did you build this hump in your back in which to hide?' The moment she said that, I realized I had been hiding all my life," Hessellund said. "That's what I find exciting and enlivening about the work - that what seems so fixed and unchangeable can change and soften."

**Rosen Method:** $25 trial bodywork sessions for new clients. Through March 14. To register, e-mail your name, city and phone number to beyondvalentines@gmail.com. An open house, including a free movement class, will be held at the Berkeley center April 10. rosenmethod.com.