Tacoma woman’s career: From registered nurse to Zulu healer

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When Nancy Rebecca flew to South Africa last April to be initiated as a Zulu sangoma — a traditional healer — the Tacoma resident knew she was heading into the unknown. She had no idea she also was heading into history.

“I kept hearing whispers, and sometimes the word ‘prophecy,’ ” Rebecca, 55, said in a recent interview.

“Finally, one man told me that Nelson Mandela had said many years ago that white people would come to them to learn their ways. The man said, ‘Now you’re coming to us and you’re interested and you’re open-hearted and you’re welcoming our way of believing without judgment.’

“He had tears in his eyes.”

The news that Rebecca and other white initiates had become sangomas — basically a traditional doctor, in her case — made the front page of the local Zulu newspaper.

“White Traditional Healer Attracts the Eyes of Many” read the headline in the Eyethu Uthukela, which is published in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Cedric John Hood, a South African resident and a sangoma, said the achievement by a white person such as Rebecca is “a big deal for the locals.”

“Black people were taught that white people don’t have ancestors,” Hood said. “So now it is difficult for black people to understand how white people can be sangomas, having no ancestors in the past.

“It was unheard of that white people became sangomas: now it’s even more strange that a white person from America would come and train as a sangoma.”
INTERESTS BEYOND TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Born in Arkansas and raised in the South in the 1960s, Rebecca’s family moved to Tacoma when she was in high school. After marrying and having two children, she became a registered nurse, joining the medical world of her physician father and psychologist mother.

Life followed the standard script until the early 1990s, when she started having out-of-body experiences at home.

“I was an intensive care nurse, and it was a shock,” she said, adding she spent years coming to terms with her experiences, developing her intuition and psychic talents to keep everything under control.

In 1998, Rebecca went to a gathering of indigenous healers at St. Martin’s University in Lacey.

“There were indigenous people from all over the world: New Zealand, Australia, Finland, a Cherokee medicine woman and others,” she said. “I was really drawn to them. As a nurse, I was really curious about how they worked with illness.”

That same year Rebecca started working as a psychic.

Among the programs she and her partner, Yvonne Kilcup, offer at their Intuitive Mind center in University Place are trips to South Africa to introduce American and Canadian healers to Zulu traditions.

THE CALLINGS BEGIN

Rebecca first visited South Africa in 2000. Three years later she and Kilcup spent a year living in a Zulu hut in the family compound of a friend. On their next trip, in 2005, Rebecca was told she had a calling to become a sangoma.

She brushed it off.

The message came through more strongly during a trip in 2007.
At one point, she recalled, “I just hit the ground and immediately had a very strong vision of being under the water. In my vision, it felt like a large snake was undulating up to the surface of the water from a deep dark place.

“When I came to, six sangomas were holding me under my arms and pounding me on my back to get me back in my body.”

Later, they explained that the vision she’d had was one of the highest visions possible.

“They felt that if I didn’t go through sangoma training, that the spirit world would try to get my attention in another way, by illness or accident,” Rebecca said.

Later on that trip, she was on a hike and standing at the edge of a river when, she said, “it felt like someone grabbed me and pulled me in by my ankles.”

Unhurt, she was told of an ancient Zulu story stating that the water is a spirit that can impart ancient knowledge. Anyone pulled in will come out of the river a full-fledged sangoma.

Rebecca still wasn’t ready.

“I was pretty rattled and anxious to get home,” she said.

“I’LL DO IT”

Rebecca kept feeling pulled, but resisted.

Then, one day in 2013, quarters appeared outside her office door, she said. A few minutes later, she started yawning so intensely that “tears started coming out of my eyes. I told my client, ‘I’m sorry, the only time this happens to me is in South Africa.’

“All of a sudden, it hit me: In South Africa, yawning is a sign that the spirits want to talk to you. And the coins were kunga coins (silver coins given to a sangoma at the start of a divination). After my client left, I started having really strong visions.”

A close friend in South Africa called. The sangoma matriarch had told him to prepare for an initiation. They realized it had to be for Rebecca.
“Finally,” she said, “I just decided, OK, I’ll go. I’ll do it. I’ll just have to trust it. Once I said yes, I stopped having the visions, and I felt peaceful inside.”

Because of her river experience and because she already was an experienced psychic, Rebecca did not have to spend at least a year apprenticing with an established sangoma.

The various ceremonies in April took three weeks, at the end of which she became a sangoma and entitled to use the traditional honorific Makhosi (Great Spirit.)

AN AVERAGE VISITOR NO MORE

In November, on her most recent trip to South Africa, Rebecca — who now wears the strings of red and white beads and goat-skin bracelets of a Zulu healer — found things were different.

In the security line at the Johannesburg airport, she caused a sensation among staff members who called over their friends to look at the white sangoma.

In Durban, while she pushed her cart around the grocery store, people placed silver coins at her feet to ask for ancestor readings. (She refused.)

“When I first got there, I tried to hide all the beads and stuff because I didn’t know how to answer their questions, and I didn’t speak their language,” Rebecca said. “Finally, one time I said, ‘I’m an American sangoma.’ That seemed to be a really good answer.”

CHANGING WORK

Back in the United States, her work has changed a bit.

“Now I can hear the spirit world much more clearly,” she said. “In the sangoma tradition, we work with your ancestors. Now I ask my clients who their ancestors are and invite them to help.

“My interest is in someone’s physical, emotional, and spiritual health. In the energy field I can see what’s out of balance. I can help them correct it to get back into balance. Then their health gets righted again.”
Rebecca said that adding Zulu techniques makes her work more effective. And it has an unexpected benefit.

“I can feel a warmth of community around me all the time,” she said. “I don’t ever feel alone in the world.”