

Good Neighbor Healthcare Center – Evolving Clinic, Enduring Values

During the tumultuous period of the late 1960s, many people began to look closely at their communities, pitch in, and do something to remedy many of the problems we faced as Americans. In some ways, this is how Good Neighbor Healthcare Center came into being.

In 1968, Dr. Robert M. Eckert, inspired by the evangelical ministry of the Church of the Redeemer Episcopal Church, left a very successful private medical practice, and opened what was then known as the Fourth Ward Kennedy Brothers Clinic, to serve the poverty-stricken neighborhoods near downtown Houston that included historic Freedmen's Town. According to a newspaper account of the time, the clinic was named in honor of the then recently fallen Kennedy brothers, John and Robert, as well as Senator Edward Kennedy, by members of the Fourth Ward community. In fact, the community played a key role in the management of the clinic in the early years, beginning a tradition of involvement that has endured to this day.

At one time, the clinic was open on West Dallas, then moved to 312 Pierce, before eventually finding a permanent home in the old Weingarten's grocery store at 277 West Gray. Through the years, the original clinic provided extensive medical care to the community, depending on a corps of volunteers and staff members who worked for very little pay. An old agency newsletter recounts that these volunteers "did whatever it took to keep the community healthy. If a house needed screens to protect children from insect bites, they put up screens, they fixed the plumbing, and they fed the hungry."

The Harris County Medical Society *Bulletin* favorably noted the work of Dr. Eckert and the Fourth Ward Clinic in September 1972, and again in November 1974. The Clinic was becoming known in the community for the excellence of its care.

However, by 1976, the group that had opened the clinic felt a calling to other missions, and the Fourth Ward Clinic ceased operating, leaving many in the community without adequate primary health care services once more. But the Fourth Ward Clinic would soon rise like a phoenix, due largely to the dedication of a small group of people who – quite simply - wouldn't give up. Mary Lou Hall, a former Board member, was intricately involved in the efforts to revive the clinic, and has very vivid recollections of that critical moment in its history. She was interviewed in 2002.

"In the fall of 1976, our church, St. John the Divine, received a letter from the Reverend Nat McGinnis, who was Director of Anchor House in the Fourth Ward, requesting our Thanksgiving food offering. So I happened to be in church one afternoon and our rector then was the Reverend Maurice Benitez (later to become Bishop Benitez of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas). His door was open and he called me in to discuss the letter with him." Out of that discussion, Ms. Hall and a group from her church went to see Reverend McGinnis to see "what his true needs were." Reverend McGinnis didn't hesitate to answer – of course, it was health care for his community, and, specifically, the re-opening of the Fourth Ward Clinic that had closed earlier in the year. And so it happened. Greatly aided by the addition of representatives from St. Philip Presbyterian and Chapelwood United Methodist churches, and with the Fourth Ward community involved as well, the group began to meet regularly.

“I like to think of the foundation of this clinic with four corners – St. John, St. Philip, Chapelwood, and the Fourth Ward community,” Ms. Hall fondly stated. “And it was a bit of an exhilarating experience to see how well we worked together, and how we were really quite a diverse group. And the main thing we had in common was that none of us knew anything about medical care, but we were very dedicated to re-opening the clinic. And it was very hard work.”

“People came together and felt like this clinic ought to be re-opened,” added David Martin, a commercial realtor who was also active in these early efforts and served for a time in the 1980s as the President of the agency.

And through their hard work, the things necessary to open a medical clinic began to happen. Dr. Harold Nelson, a sociology professor from the University of Houston, offered some invaluable expertise and leadership during this time, and eventually, according to Ms. Hall, “a doctor was found who was willing to come out of retirement and work for a year at a low salary.”

Miraculously, the Fourth Ward Clinic re-opened on May 1, 1977, with a mere \$900 in operating funds. Within the week, however, M.D. Anderson Foundation awarded the clinic a \$25,000 grant, and the clinic’s doors were open for good.

Following those initial hurdles, the clinic grew slowly, step by step. Although it would experience some financial challenges from time to time, the faith and persistence of the Board never wavered. The Fourth Ward Clinic once again became a mainstay in the community. Jeanne Sickman-Hanks, who served as the Executive Director from 1989 to 1998, recalled in 2002 the sense of closeness that the clinic enjoyed among its neighbors and patients. “I live in the neighborhood and have lived here since 1989 and on the first Halloween I was here, my trick or treaters were patients. Or I would be out with my dog, or be out bicycling and see the patients. I realized how powerful Good Neighbor was when I got to know the patients. When you see the impact it has on some people’s lives, it’s tremendous.”

Liz Hogan, who was the clinic’s nutritionist for about 10 years, remembered that the patients she served always had economic worries, though most of them had jobs: “A lot of them were just coming into the city, just getting started. And a lot of them were people who lived in the neighborhood. I used to get food from the church. They built me a little place for the food pantry. They gave me maybe \$300 a month, and I would order food to help the street people that came to the clinic. A lot of people did come in both sick *and* hungry.”

As the clinic provided more services to the community, renovation of the facility became a necessity. The west side of the building was refurbished in 1983-84, and this was followed by the remodeling of the east side (known fondly to staff members as “the dungeon”) in 1996. “The big mechanical device that provided the heating and the cooling for the building was back there,” Ms. Sickman-Hanks explained, “and it looked like a dragon. The dungeon was the right name! We wanted to use the space because we were bursting at the seams.”

By 1986, the Board voted to change the name of the clinic to Good Neighbor Healthcare Center, to reflect the wider role that the clinic now played in the community. Indeed, the Center now serves individuals from nearly every zip code in the Greater Houston area.

During the 1990s, the Center reached agreements with the University of Texas and Baylor College of Medicine, so that patients could have full and affordable access to quality pediatric care, adult care, and midwifery services. And following years of planning and fundraising, the Center proudly opened the Good Neighbor Dental Clinic in 2000, addressing a critical need in the community for regular dental care.

Within the next several years, the Center underwent other significant developments, under the guidance of an active board, led by the Reverend F.N. Williams II, and the leadership of a strong, resourceful Administrator, Executive Director Janet S. Donath.

As the agency readied itself to become a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), GNHC hired a Medical Director and established a Med/Ped clinic in 2004, ending its relationship with the University of Texas' Pediatric Department. The Med/Ped clinic quickly became highly popular among patients since now the same provider saw entire families. This simple change led patients to play a more active role in their own health care, as well as the health care of their family members. By 2006, as the demand for accessible care grew at an alarming pace in the community, the Med/Ped clinic included 2 physicians and one family nurse practitioner. Good Neighbor added other key services during the mid 2000s including a Class D Pharmacy and a Behavioral Health Services program – again addressing glaring needs for these services among our patients.

Following two years of planning and community input, Good Neighbor attained the status of an FQHC in September 2005, and immediately swung into action in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. With hundreds of thousands of evacuees moving into the Greater Houston area, GNHC staff provided direct care; referral services, and coordinated the distribution of crucial medical supplies among several agencies. Never before in its long history had Good Neighbor taken such an active stance as a leader among community health care providers.

In the wake of its hurricane relief efforts, Good Neighbor established an extended hours clinic for patients unable to make appointments during regular clinic hours. Making it as easy as possible for the patient to receive services at the most convenient time for the patient, and by the same provider each time - as the decade wore on, this philosophy was adapted by Good Neighbor as it began to redesign service provision so that each person accessing care at the clinic had the optimal experience possible.

Good Neighbor began to evolve and grow in other ways as well during the 2000s. The agency's outstanding childhood immunization program won the Excel Award every year starting in 2002, presented by the City of Houston's Department of Health and Human Services for meeting or exceeding immunization goals. Funded by the Houston affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, Good Neighbor partnered with M.D. Anderson Mobile Mammography Clinic and The Rose to provide breast cancer awareness, education, and screening services for the community. As the Swalm Foundation concluded its distinguished philanthropic service to the community in 2006, it awarded \$500,000 to Good Neighbor as the seed money for an endowment fund – the Good Neighbor Healthcare Center Endowment Fund – which will help support the clinic's mission to the community into the future.

"It's been a busy, exciting six or seven years," recalls Ms. Donath. "I have never worked harder, and I have never seen a staff work so hard. And yet, we knew we had no choice

– the needs in the community for accessible health care are overwhelming, really heartbreaking.”

Indeed, studies indicated that one out of every three people living in the Greater Houston area had little or no health insurance and were often unable to afford adequate medical care for their families. Faced by this crisis, Good Neighbor’s leadership realized that their old converted grocery store on West Gray was far too small and inadequate in other ways to accommodate the growing number of patients. A decision was made to partner with the City of Houston and move to the West End Clinic, once renovated. That move, due to take place in the winter of 2007-2008, will provide Good Neighbor with 13,000 square feet of clinical space – more than double its current footage – and make it possible for the clinic to serve 8,000 patients a year.

Although Good Neighbor Healthcare Center continues to evolve as a modern community resource where many needs can be met at once, people still look at in much the same way they did years ago – as a place where families and neighbors can always feel comfortable and at home. Ms. Hall smiled in 2002 when she thought of this particular quality of the Center, and said “The ‘homey-ness’ was there *before* the doors opened.”