

Decade Celebration: Reaching Out To Help Those In Need

by Todd Wetherington, Daily Herald Staff Writer/

ROANOKE RAPIDS — For a decade, a group of dedicated volunteers has provided medical care to the chronically ill who are unable to afford treatment. This past week, the Roanoke Valley Medical Ministries Clinic celebrated 10 years of service by honoring the volunteers and medical providers who are there for others.

The appreciation ceremony at the First Baptist Church in Roanoke Rapids was an opportunity to recognize an often-overlooked asset founded by Dr. Gupta Pandarinath in 1999. The free clinic provides health care to those suffering from chronic illnesses who are unable to afford treatment due to lack of health insurance coverage. They often earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid and are too young to qualify for Medicare. These patients are frequently unable to afford medications and may require repeated trips to a physician as well as emergency hospital care.

Following a brief luncheon, clinic Executive Director Rose Fleming spoke about the clinic's early days. "Our charts were in a milk crate that had to be carried in and out, we were using what was the Roanoke Clinic at that time and our supplies were kept in the maintenance closet. We said 'Oh, we're not going to have any patients.' Well, the first day we had six patients and it's just grown from there."

Guest speaker Jason Baisden, executive director of the North Carolina Free Clinic Association, addressed the growing demand for alternative sources of medical care across the state. He stated since 2004, 23 new clinics have opened in the state. North Carolina is home to 77 free facilities serving 79 counties utilizing the talents of approximately 7,200 volunteers. According to Baisden, 1.4 to 1.6 million citizens across the state are currently uninsured, with rural counties like Halifax accounting for half that number.

Baisden pointed out, "Clinics like this are doing a phenomenal job of providing care to the uninsured.

"The foundation of the free clinic is the community. It's incumbent upon community members to say 'what are we going to do to face these difficult challenges and tough decisions?' You hear people talk about the health of the community and that means more than the economics. That means the literal health of its citizens. No matter what stimulus package comes or doesn't come it's ultimately here, within the community, that the challenges are faced."

Since 2004, Baisden said unduplicated patient visits have increased 71 percent, with free clinics providing more than \$200 million in free health care.

After Baisden's talk, Fleming called upon a number of the clinic volunteers in attendance, presenting them with certificates of appreciation and a single, red rose.

"Our system here is as good as it is because of the volunteers," said Dr. Kenneth Robert, the clinic's medical director. "The people who started it, the volunteers are there every Wednesday.

Everyone's really happy and chirpy. I've seen patients in tears, saying 'I didn't know this was here'. We recently treated a diabetic woman who was out of insulin and we were able to help her."

One Valley resident who has benefited from the clinic's services is Linda Edmonds, who attended the event.

"I got great service and lots of love," she said with a weary smile. "I got all my medicine, lab work, everything I needed. I came down with a disabling condition and they helped me, that's why I'm able to stand here today without a wheelchair. Love and hugs; it's the only place you can find that."

Following the presentations, Fleming spoke about the clinic's partnership with Halifax Regional Medical Center, which has provided \$1 million in services to the clinic since its inception. "We could not do it in this area without the hospital," she stated. "Clinics like ours that don't have strong ties to their local hospitals are struggling. My only regret is that we can't help more that need it. Due to the cost of the medications we have to limit the number of people to those with chronic needs and those that have no insurance."

HRMC President Will Mahone spoke briefly during the ceremony and expressed his appreciation for the work and dedication of the area volunteers. "It truly is a ministry. It's a symbol of how we care for everyone in the community. We've received a lot of support from local physicians who've lent their time and expertise. Despite all the negative things you hear about our community, today was a sunny day to recognize all the volunteers who do so much for our community."

Despite the support, Fleming said the clinic hasn't escaped the harsh realities of the recent economic downturn. "We need help," she stated emphatically. "We've had to limit the medications we give out because of the cost. The number of new patients we see has definitely increased. Each week we're seeing four or five new patients."

Fleming said the clinic is actively seeking new volunteers. "Anyone can volunteer," she said. "There are no special qualifications, we need all kinds."

The clinic is located in Roanoke Rapids at 536 Jackson St. It is open for patient care each Wednesday night from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. by appointment only. Anyone wishing to volunteer may contact the clinic at (252) 308-1261. Donations may be sent to P.O. Box 1344, Roanoke Rapids 27870.