

Ponytail gone, health service leader goes from activist to the mainstream

By STAN DeCOSTER

Day Staff Writer

Mark Masselli, a floppy-haired product of the 1960s who wasn't educated to be anything in particular, was born to be both a community activist and wheeling-dealing entrepreneur, according to those who know him well.

The 46-year-old, who says he did just "a little college here and there," recently sliced off the ponytail that he has had for years. The change in appearance came as his business career kicked into a higher gear.

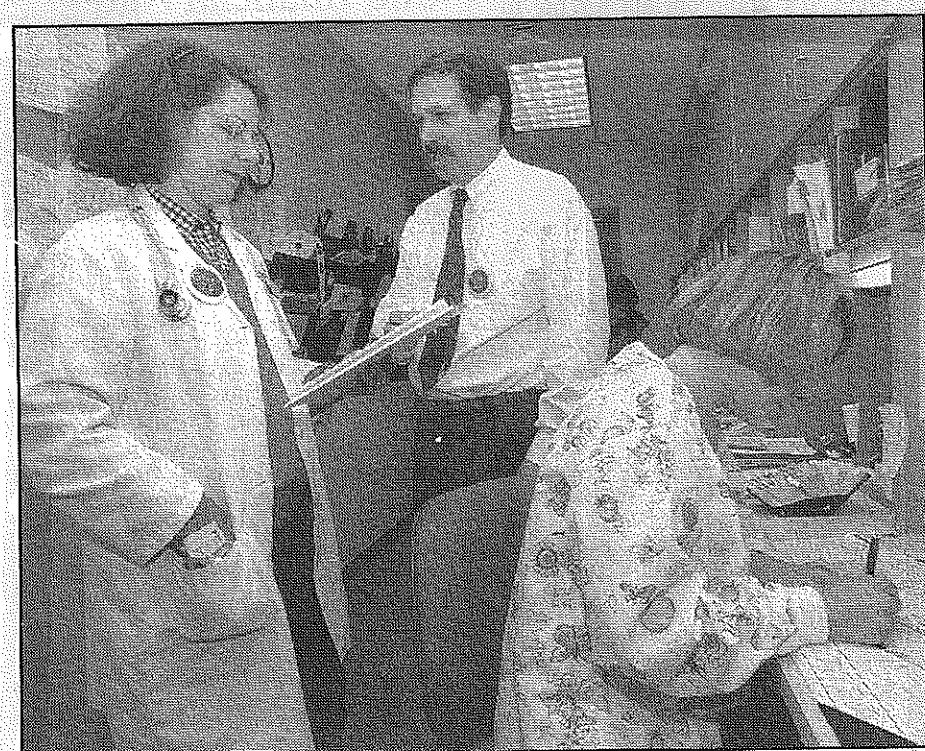
"He's gone from counter-culture to being a mainstream deliverer of

medical services," said Gerald Weitzman, who has been a member of the Middletown-based Community Health Center Inc. since Masselli formed it in 1972.

The non-profit health agency now has an \$11 million annual budget and serves 29,000 people — most of them poor — in six communities, including 9,300 in New London and 1,400 in Groton.

Masselli, who is married and the father of three children, also has been the driving force behind HealthRight Inc., a managed care company with an annual budget approaching \$60 million. He is HealthRight's chief executive of-

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■ *Mark Masselli with Ruth Sandin, a licensed practical nurse, and Corina Snell, a registered nurse, at Community Health Center in New London.*

Masselli goes from activist to entrepreneur

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ficer and chairman of the board.

He started it all 25 years ago, when he decided to work with the poor and medically underserved in his hometown of Middletown. He launched an effort to establish a free health clinic.

"I incorporated with \$40 out of my own pocket," he said last month, relaxing inside his Middletown office.

Before that he had no specific career direction. He had decided, however, that college wasn't for him.

Friends said that Masselli, in the 1960s and '70s, developed a social conscience and liberal leanings that have remained with him through the years. He, like many other college-age people of the time, became a protester for social justice.

Many of his views, Masselli said, were shaped at an early age when his father took him on a trip to the deep South. He was shocked by the way blacks were treated in their own country, he said. In 1988, he served as a delegate for Jesse Jackson at the Democratic National Convention.

Taking a stand

Masselli has been active on other human rights fronts. According to a biographical

profile that HealthRight filed with the state:

"He was an incorporator of the Bishop Tuftu Refugee Fund, which was formed by the Archbishop's daughter Naomi, during the 1980s. He is president of Americans Helping Tibetans, and has traveled extensively with His Holiness the Dalai Lama."

Masselli said he met the Dalai Lama, who is Tibet's exiled religious leader, many years ago at a religious conference at Harvard University. Since then, he said, he has travelled with him to India and Nepal, among other places. He described the Dalai Lama as a man of peace, much like Martin Luther King, who doesn't try to impose his beliefs on others.

Longtime friends and associates said that Masselli, in addition to having a compassionate side, has an aggressive style that has been key to his success.

Lawrence McHugh, president of Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, said he was Masselli's football coach at Xavier High School. He described Masselli as an under-sized defensive end who could play with the bigger boys.

"He strived to be the very best that he could be," McHugh said. "One thing about Mark — he had a never-quit attitude. From my experience, it's people with that kind of

attitude that go places in life."

For-profit controversy

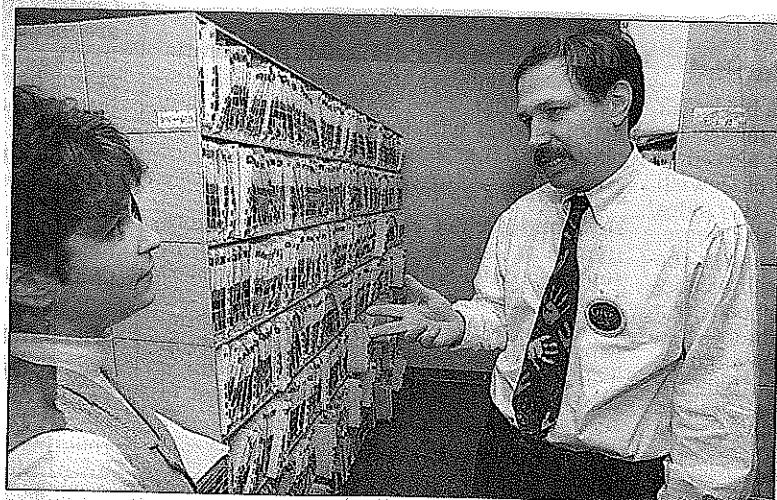
The formation of HealthRight became controversial within Connecticut's network of community health care organizations because of the company's for-profit status. But even those who went in the other direction — and created a not-for-profit managed care company — respect Masselli's drive.

"He's intelligent, charismatic, aggressive," said Cornell Scott, executive director of the Hill Health Center in New Haven.

Steven Piaker of Conning & Co., the Hartford-based firm that invested \$4 million in HealthRight, called Masselli "a very shrewd businessman" with more corporate savvy than would be expected from a grassroots activist.

Piaker, one of three Conning & Co. representatives on HealthRight's board of directors, said the company was impressed by the way Masselli ran the health centers as a business, not relying solely on government grants.

Masselli said he always has emphasized frugality, while delivering quality health care to the poor. "I try to squeeze every penny out of every dollar," he said. □



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■ *Mark Masselli talks with medical office manager Patricia Martin at Community Health Center Inc. in New London.*