

Reflections on 30 years at the Community Health Center

By MARK MASSELLI

May 1 marked the 30th anniversary of Community Health Center. I'm writing to thank you — our staff, board and friends — and to reminisce about our beginnings.

May 1, 1972, seems like both yesterday and a lifetime ago. Three decades ago, a new home cost \$30,000; a new car was \$3,500; "MASH" made its debut on television; Nixon visited China, and the Watergate scandal began; the Lakers beat the Knicks; and the Grammy for best album went to "The Concert for Bangladesh" by George Harrison.

And on College Street in Middletown, a small band of community activists opened Connecticut's first free medical and dental clinic. It was a second-floor walk-up that was converted from a two-bedroom apartment. The décor was straight out of Haight-Asbury — tie-dyed curtains, surreal paintings and a staff whose hair length matched their commitment and enthusiasm. The Community Health Center was given life by a mixture of community organizers, Main Street businessman and Wesleyan students.

Figuring prominently were our three founders: Jerry Weitzman, Reba Moses and yours truly, Mark Masselli. The list of supporters grew as the health center's simple message, "health care is a right and not a privilege," resonated throughout the community.

Equally important to our mission was the way that we related to our patients. It started with the simple courtesy of "good morning," to patients who for too long had been ignored, disrespected and relegated to charity and episodic care. Our agency built its success on understanding what it

means to be poor, a person of color, an immigrant, a woman, a young family, a working family — a person ignored and forgotten by the health system. In return, our patients gave us enormous support and encouragement in the neighborhoods that we serve. Slowly, we matched their trust with a comprehensive and qualitative health service delivery system that provides cradle to rocking chair care.

Today, we provide comprehensive health services, including pediatrics, internal medicine, family practice, family planning, a breast and cervical cancer detection program, asthma and diabetes management, prenatal, lactation service, dental, mental health, a child guidance clinic, homeless case management, eligibility assistance, women and family services, a family resource center, the Homeroom after-school program, Battered Women's Shelter, school-based health centers, community-based services, AIDS/HIV services, and parent aides — and countless other support and enabling services.

And from that the small cold flat on College Street — today, we are providing care in over 100,000 square feet of space, in modern facilities with state-of-the-art medical and dental equipment. From Middletown, we have expanded as communities from across Connecticut

have asked us to lend a hand. We believe that leadership means responding to what the community needs, and so we now call several towns home:

Old Saybrook, Clinton, Groton, New London, Meriden and New Britain. We are in four schools, a homeless shelter, and just yesterday, Danbury Hospital and CHC announced that we will soon add Danbury as a new home. The numbers help tell the story: CHC actively provides primary health care for approximately 70,000 people. Last year, we provided around 175,000 visits, these services are provided with a staff of nearly 300.

Through the years, we have built strategic partnerships with hospitals, health departments, United Ways, public school districts, area agencies on aging, Ryan White consortia, chambers of commerce, Wesleyan and Yale Universities, the state of Connecticut, the Bureau of Primary Health Care, SAMHSA and our brother and sister health and human service agencies. On this anniversary, we tip our hat to these organizations and thank them for their support.

On the national level, CHC is accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations, participates in National Collaborative on Asthma and Diabetes, and is a member the National

Association of Community Health Centers. These relationships underscore the health center's commitment to excellence in the delivery of health care. But most important, each day an individual makes the decision to visit us, to put their care in our hands. They come for a lot of reasons, but the one I know that looms large is our staff.

I can't think of a better group of people; dedicated, compassionate and experienced. To all of you, past and present — your work has been the greatest gift CHC has ever received — thank you so much.

People have heard me say this on more than one occasion: We didn't get here on our own and we can't move forward alone. We accomplished all of this because you helped — whether quietly behind the scenes or out on the frontlines — you helped and that is so important to the work we do. Thank you.

You've made a difference and we won't forget. Please continue to do every thing you can wherever you can, so that one day we can join hands together and give witness that "health care is a right, not a privilege."

On behalf of myself and Margaret Flinter, vice president and clinical director, we look forward to you joining us in some celebratory events during the next 12 months.

Of course, reminiscing should be a two-way street. We'd love it if you would share your memories and thoughts so we might have a richer history to pass on. Hope to hear from you soon.

Mark Masselli is the president and chief executive officer of the Community Health Center Inc.

*The décor was
straight out of
Haight-Asbury
— tie-dyed
curtains,
surreal
paintings and
a staff whose
hair length
matched their
commitment
and
enthusiasm.*
