

# A different world

*Dr. David Waters journeys from the comfort of Shorewood each morning to the chaos of an inner city clinic*

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Early in the '70s, a fledgling community health center was struggling into existence on Milwaukee's near south side. Along the lakefront, runners were lining up annually for a race to raise funds for children's medical care. Half a world away, Southeast Asians were joining with U.S. military personnel in an armed conflict that eventually forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee to escape persecution. And a boy in Whitefish Bay was learning Spanish. Before the close of the next decade they would all come together.

One September day in 1986, Shorewood's Dr. David Waters, Spanish scholar, runner and pediatrician, would meet a friend for an ordinary lunch—and order himself up an extraordinary life. Waters, who was practicing pediatrics at Health Clinic in Portland, Ore. and at a federally funded clinic for migrant workers in Woodburn at the time, had returned home to “run the Al McGuire Run.” Ravenous after the run, he and a friend headed to the Mercado el Rey for lunch and Waters spotted the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center just across the street.

“I went in that very afternoon and talked with the medical director,” Waters says. “This was the kind of work I always wanted to do. Imagine finding my life’s work in the town I grew up in. I was only ten miles away and I never knew this place existed!” Waters’ interest in other cultures began quite simply—in a high school Spanish class. “I loved the language,” he says. “I loved learning about the culture, the food I wanted to travel, to keep learning more.”

Knowing that he wanted to continue using his language skills, knowing he wanted to continue experiencing other cultures, Waters sought out opportunities to do both after medical school. He just never expected to find what he was looking for so close to home.

At the Sixteenth Street Center, which offers a wide variety of health and human services, Waters contentedly treats patients who might otherwise be underserved. The Center receives funds

from federal, state, and local government, in addition to a number of Milwaukee foundations and businesses.

“These are wonderful people,” says Waters, whose other option would have been to set up a more lucrative suburban practice. “I get a real sense of satisfaction in serving them. I don’t have to worry about the details of running a private practice. And I’m not just another pediatrician down the block.”

Last year, the Center served more than 33,000 patients, both individuals and families, with pediatric care, family practice, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology. Of those patients, 45 percent were under 11 years of age.

Health education, social service, and case management programs are also available through the Center including one-on-one counseling, support groups and referrals.

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— Dr. David Waters

Problems such as alcohol and other substance abuse, housing, domestic violence, legal issues, unemployment and HIV are addressed. The focus remains on specialized care, constant follow-up and outreach to all high-risk clients.

According to Waters, the Center, which has been recognized as a national model for providing innovative approaches to cost-effective, community-based care, emphasizes prevention as well as intervention.

“Prevention is ultimately more cost effective,” Waters says. “By taking a team approach to care and striving for a comprehensive package, we can intervene before a patient is sick enough to require expensive treatment.” A pregnant patient at the Center, for example, might see a social worker in addition to her doctor, might take prenatal classes, have a home assessment, and talk at length with a nurse.

Waters likes the idea of community-based health centers and sees the Sixteenth Street Center as a place where people are not just treated for something that’s wrong, but are encouraged to lead a healthy life. “We tend to help in an informal way here,” he says. “We’re on a first-name basis with our clients. That’s important for our mission and it makes this an inspiring place to work.”

As a community-based health center, the majority of clients deal with linguis-



tic, cultural and economic barriers. The population is approximately 72 percent Hispanic, 17 percent white, 7 percent Southeast Asian and 4 percent African American.

Services are offered in English, Spanish, Hmong and Laotian. And that's where David Waters shines. "Even though Hmong refugees have been living in the United States for nearly two decades," he wrote in a 1992 article for the *Wisconsin Medical Journal*, "many U.S. health care providers know little about the Hmong people and their history, culture, beliefs and practices."

Waters takes seriously what he sees as his responsibility to learn as much as he can about the culture of his clients and to encourage his colleagues in the medical profession to respect cultural differences while treating patients.

The differences to be respected extend to other variables as well. Approximately 70 percent of the Center's clients have incomes below the poverty level. That means they are dealing with problems commonly associated with poverty that affect their need for health care: poor housing conditions, lack of health insurance, environmental health hazards, poor nutrition, crime and violence.

Waters is concerned that decisions to support centers such as Sixteenth Street are often made by legislators and others who may have no contact with the men, women, and children who are served.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about the poor," Waters says. "There are currently not a lot of linkages between the community and the decision makers. Keeping accessible, culturally sensitive on-site care in neighborhoods is healthy and is a key to solving some of our urban problems."

Waters and the Sixteenth Street Community Center seem to be a perfect match. The Center, according to Waters, grew out of the Great Society movement of the '60s and the intention to offer health and social services to a very ne patient population— with-

out adequate doctors. Waters was growing up at that same time, experiencing rampant idealism and a strong sentiment for making positive changes in the world. Both the man and the Center are still committed to those goals.

Waters lives in Shorewood with his wife, Ann Brummitt, and daughters Nora and Sara. One reason the family chooses to make its home there is its proximity to the lake where they can run and bike together.

Even more important, Waters sees Shorewood as an open-minded community. "Shorewood has a multicultural, urban feel," Waters says. "It's supportive of education, and seems to value family and children. The residents are very community-minded, not just focused on self-interest."

Yet, as much as he loves his home community, Waters looks forward every day to his drive to the south side. "I used to wonder what would happen if funding were cut, if I would still have a job," Waters says. "But it's been eight years and I'm still here. I'm working with patients that need me, with dedicated volunteers and staff that buy into the cause, the mission of this place. I can't think of any other job that would allow me to immerse myself in language and multiculturalism and keep me working with such a great group of people. I plan to stay."

Waters is still a runner, still a physician, still a lover of the Hispanic language, culture and food. Even more important, at a time of life when many choose the proven path, he is ever exploring new ones, ever expanding what he learned in medical school, ever increasing his knowledge of languages, cultures and people, then sharing what he learns with his patients and his colleagues.

It would seem that, even though many years have passed since that high school Spanish class, Dr. David Waters is still very much a student. And that makes him no ordinary physician. It makes him instead an extraordinary care giver. ■

