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For Middletown, health care dream becomes a reality

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Thirty-five years ago, several college-age idealists, one of whom was a student at Wesleyan, decided to create an organization that would transform access to affordable health services in the Middletown area. On Nov. 1, the Middletown Community Health Center (CHC), the product of these efforts, held its thirty-fifth anniversary gala, attended by 220 dignitaries, supporters, and members, at Beckham Hall in Fayerweather.

It was 1972 when Mark Masselli, current President and CEO of the CHC, opened the walk-in center at 635 Main St. with friends Matt Vinnigis and John Hickenlooper '74, who is now the mayor of Denver, CO.

"I met Mark Maselli right when he started [the health center]," Hickenlooper said. "There was a half-day doctor and a half-day dentist. I helped with the renovation, but it was really Mark's deal."

Masselli wanted a place where members of the community, no matter what economic or social background, would be provided with affordable quality health care. In order to build the health center, Masselli overcame years of obstacles and opposition from the established medical community, who some say feared increased competition because of the center's lower costs.

"It was really his baby," said Connie Gillies, a former CHC employee. "The Middlesex Hospital wasn't very happy to see him come in, but he just persisted."

Many of the obstacles had to do with the inexperience of Masselli, a first-timer in the medical field. At first, he didn't realize he needed a medical license and spent time obtaining one. He also did not build the original establishment to health code specifications, eventually causing the Department of Public Health to shut the opera-

tion down.

Masselli and his co-founders renovated the health center to specifications and reopened shortly thereafter.

"If you go into the health center today you'll notice the hallways are nice and wide," he said.

Today the CHC has expanded from the original Middletown center to 11 site locations across the state, serving 70,000 patients yearly. Its growth has even sparked interest from health providers internationally.

"I just came to see how the health center works and what we can learn from it," said Ravi Ravindran, of Arivand Eye Hospital in India. "What is so good to see is the commitment among the staff," he said.

Mayor of Middletown, Sebastian Guiliano says that the community is extremely grateful for the center.

"It's not just important to us, it provides care to others outside the community, others who wouldn't necessarily have those services," he said. "The services are provided in a very economical way. This model is something others are looking at."

One such service is the CHC's Mobile Dental Program, which brings free dental care to children through the school system. Now parents do not have to miss work and the children do not have to miss school in order to attend to their oral hygiene. Amy Morales, Director of the Family Resource Center in Enfield, praised the program's accessibility.

"We come into contact with a lot of families. It's a good resource we can refer them to," she said. "It's in town, they can walk to it."

Lou Brady, Director of the CHC site in Meriden, was a patient of the healthcare center as a child.

"Although we were of limited means, we were not of limited care," he said.

Brady is glad that the commitment to need-blind care has not changed with the center's development. Today, its mission remains the same: "to be a voice and vehicle for social change."