



BETANCES HEALTH CENTER

WE STARTED ON WHEELS...

In the summer of 1969, Judson Memorial Church approached local community activist Paul Ramos to help develop the "East Village Youth Project," informally known as the Judson Mobile Health Unit. The Church was concerned about the health conditions among the "hippies" then flocking to the East Village. Health services and screenings were provided from a construction trailer, which was parked in several locations for three or four months at a time. After several months Paul persuaded the Church to reorganize its program to meet the health needs of not only the transient hippie population, but also the minority, low-income adolescents who were permanent residents of the area. By September of 1970, the hippie population began to dwindle and in October the Church was ready to end the program and leave the East Village. Paul and his colleagues convinced the Church to donate the construction trailer to them to continue the services on their own, focusing on the needs of the predominately immigrant Latino, low-income population of the Lower East Side. They formed a Board of Directors, filed for incorporation, and rechristened the effort "Betances Health Unit" named for the 19th Century Puerto Rican physician, poet, and patriot who fought a virulent cholera epidemic in Puerto Rico in 1855 and who risked his life many times in the struggle to abolish slavery and end colonial repression.

In 1972, with no fundraising experience, Paul, along with his wife Roni Sherman Ramos and then Chief Financial Officer Wanda Evans, were able to raise \$24,000 from foundations and private donations to purchase a 27' van which they equipped with an examination room, waiting area, and lab space for simple tests to serve as a mobile screening facility. With its fully equipped mobile van the Betances staff took its mission to promote quality affordable health care as a basic right for all, regardless of ability to pay, to the medically underserved people of the Lower East Side. Its corps of volunteer doctors, nurses, and paraprofessionals provided immunizations, PAP smears, screenings for venereal disease and diabetes, and health education. Betances early years focused on providing ethnically responsive diagnostic services with follow up to ensure that case findings through screenings led to treatment.

An example of Betances' early success was an anemia screening program conducted at several day care centers in the Lower East Side. The results of the program were so troublesome that it prompted the Health Department to mandate pre-entrance urinalysis for all day care children. In another instance, Betances in conjunction with the settlement houses in the area, set up a lead poisoning screening program aimed at the residents of the Lower East Side's tenements. Out of 135 children screened, 15 had exceedingly high levels of lead, and three required immediate hospitalization and treatment. Betances' efforts resulted in new guidelines and requirements by the Health Department and new priorities for screening programs. Unfortunately, Betances discovered that all too often when a low-income minority was diagnosed with an illness and sent to an area hospital for follow up treatment he or she was met with a bewildering, humiliating, and depressing experience. Get in line. You brought the wrong form. We don't speak Spanish...Chinese...Take a number. The Board and staff of Betances realized that they would have to drastically expand services to avoid the racism and classism regularly doled out at area hospitals. Betances also realized that the most effective way to avoid these problems was to provide vital health care and information before our patients got sick. This was preventive medicine before the invention of the term. Betances sought a permanent base and in 1973 moved into offices above a pickle factory on Essex Street, while maintaining operation of the mobile health van. Finally, in 1977 Betances moved into its own facility on East Broadway with three exam rooms, a waiting room, and administrative offices. The building was owned by Henry Street Settlement, then under the direction of Mr. Bertram Beck, who rented the building to Betances for one dollar a year until Betances was able to pay fair value for the space.

In 1978, with a National Health Service Corps grant, Betances was able to hire two full-time salaried physicians, a nurse practitioner, and a physician's assistant. Thus, Betances was able to move from a rotation of volunteer medical providers to a permanent staff of medical providers. With many of our patients having developed a profound distrust for institutionalized medicine and its emphasis on disease,

drugs, and technology, Betances sought to provide a "holistic" approach to the practice of health care—treating the whole person and the whole family. Programs that emerged from this included culturally sensitive nutritional counseling as a means of preventing and treating chronic disease, harm reduction, mental health and social services, vitamin/herbal therapy, and medical massage therapy. Betances was one of the first health care centers in New York to offer acupuncture, and arguably the first to offer it to low-income patients. Betances was also one of the first community health centers to respond to the outbreak of HIV and AIDS in Manhattan. Since the early eighties Betances has developed the reputation for being on the forefront of HIV-related health services, with its focus on early intervention to enhance and rebuild the immune system and prevent the onset of infections. Betances offers its HIV-positive patients both conventional and state of the art alternative therapies designed to reduce stress, relieve pain, and enhance overall health and well-being.

Over the years, we have grown in direct response to our community's changing health care needs. In 1986 Betances moved to our current location at 280 Henry Street. The site, originally a supermarket, was covered in graffiti and did not reflect the warm, inviting atmosphere Betances wanted to convey. In addition, it was soon evident that the center was outgrowing the space. Thus, Betances took on the challenge of expanding the center and its services to better meet our vision of a healthier community. We have also changed our name to Betances Health Center, to reflect the complete care one receives at Betances. Our expansion effort has been made possible through the untiring efforts of our Executive Staff and Board of Directors, along with the generous support of the Primary Care Development Corporation and the New York State Department of Health. New services include physical and occupational therapy, ophthalmology, and audiology. Added to our new services is a beautifully expanded and remodeled facility, further enhancing the Betances patient visit experience.

Over the center's three decade history it was largely founder Paul Ramos' determination and hard work that led to the growth and success of Betances. Ramos started out as Chair of the Betances Board of Directors and in 1977 assumed the role of Executive Director. Sadly, Paul passed away in May 2000, but current Executive Director Wanda Evans, the Executive Staff, and Board are pleased to carry on his vision with the completion of this major project.

Today Betances has emerged as a leader in community based primary care, serving over 6,000 underserved patients each year. Our pioneering strategy of integrated care, merging traditional Western medicine and specialty services with holistic treatments consonant with diverse health care beliefs and practices directly responds to a prevalence of serious health risks such as impaired childhood development, teen pregnancy, and chronic disease, that result from inner city poverty and insufficient access to primary care. Betances is also one of the few local agencies to offer a sliding scale fee. Our services include primary care, pediatric medicine, family medicine, internal medicine, family planning, senior care, HIV/AIDS care, testing, and counseling, cardiology, OB/GYN, prenatal care, podiatry, ophthalmology, psychiatry, physician house calls, audiology, behavioral health, physical and occupational therapy and complementary and alternative care. Last year, Betances had 33,000 patient visits, 63% reflecting individuals from areas designated as health crisis zones due to insufficient health access and high rates of HIV infection and substance abuse. In addition, 18% of our patients were uninsured or underinsured, a number that is increasing steadily. Our annual operating budget is now over \$7 million, we have a diverse, multilingual staff of 80, and a sixteen member, predominately minority Board of Directors.

We are honored that you have joined us today for the launch of our newly renovated and expanded center. We hope you enjoy yourself and that we will see you again in the near future. Thank you for your continuing support.

Yours for better health!