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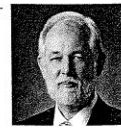
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Velma
Hendershott
President / CEO InterCare Community
Health Network

LIVING A SERVICE TO THE
Health of Others

By Robert M. Weir



Velma Hendershott

Living a service to the

Health of Others



"Migrant health is in my blood," states Velma Hendershott.

Velma is president and CEO of InterCare Community Health Network, an organization that brings health care to populations most at risk in southwest Michigan, whether they are migrant farmworkers or community residents. InterCare treats approximately 40,000 individuals each year in six facilities in Bangor, Benton Harbor, Eau Claire, Holland, Pullman, and Sparta. "Our patient population is different in each community, and we are mindful and responsive to that diversity," Velma says.

Operating under the philosophy that "all people have the right to equal access to quality health care," InterCare provides comprehensive medical and dental services based on patients' needs, not income or place of residence. With an emphasis on prevention and early detection, InterCare offers immunizations, well-child checkups, family planning, prenatal care, nutrition counseling, and health education. Many of InterCare's 300 employees speak both English and Spanish.

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InterCare began in 1972 with the impetus of serving migrant farmworkers, many of whom lived in camps located on the property of farmers for whom they harvested crops.

Velma was part of that community. She was born in Texas and came to Michigan with her parents, Dolores and Elvira Solis, as a child in 1960. As a pre-teen, she worked in the fields hoeing pickles for less than minimum wage prior to child labor laws.

Seeking residential stability, her parents chose to settle in Van Buren County. Dolores worked for a pickle company and coordinated the Bracero Program, which provided the workforce for pickle growers, and Elvira took a job in a factory. But those were stepping stones that led to Elvira's employment in various positions coordinating programs that provided health care to migrant farmworkers and Dolores' employment for the Van Buren Intermediate School District where he was a home-school liaison for the migrant education program.

Because of their concern for health and education of others, the Solis home was, as Velma describes it, "a revolving door for migrant families arriving in Michigan who needed familiarity with area services." Health care was available on a limited basis and provided by volunteer physicians in temporary clinics in church basements. As a student at Bangor High School, Velma accompanied her parents to work in those clinics. "We would start in the afternoon and work late into the night, until all patients had been seen," she says.

Velma graduated from Western Michigan University with a degree in social work in 1977. She went to work for InterCare, which was then called BCV Health Services in reference to its original service area of Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. Her mother was the executive director from 1974 to 1979, a position Velma did not expect to attain. Yet, opportunities arose, situations evolved, and she assumed the CEO office in August 1986.

That pattern of seizing opportunities, along with true love for her job, has continued throughout Velma's career. She has testified before the U.S. Congress on behalf of community health centers and has served as chair of the National Association of Community Health Centers. She is currently on the board of directors of the Michigan Primary Care Association and the National Center for Farmworker Health.

Of the InterCare staff, she says, "I am very proud of their dedication to caring and serving our patients and communities. They continue to inspire me as I see their commitment to InterCare's mission."

Velma also appreciates support she receives from her husband, Robert, who is CEO of a community health center. And she

takes delight in her younger daughter, Catherine, who now works in a community health center in New York. "My mother, my daughter, and I are the first three-generation family in the nation to work in the community health center movement," she says with justifiable pride.

Looking back at her 31-year career at InterCare, Velma Hendershott expresses gratitude for her parents whose passion and action were to serve others along with an emphasis on education. "My parents provided a strong work ethic and values that have been the foundation I have followed throughout my life," she says.

For young people today, Velma advises, "Stay in school. Pursue those dreams, aspirations, and educational opportunities, and most importantly believe in yourself. With loans and grants, money is never a reason not to go to school."

With education and the example set by her parents, Velma clearly demonstrates her dedication to helping others. "Serving patients through InterCare is more than a job," she says. "It's part of who I am."



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