



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
The future home of the Orange County Free Clinic and Piedmont Regional Dental Clinic will be the former Nova Care facility in Colonial Square Shopping Center on Route 15 south of Orange.

The fourth miracle...you

Thinking about doing some good this Christmas? Want to play Santa?

The Orange Free Clinic needs everything from copy paper to office furniture, from band aids to a crash kit.

Or consider making a donation of cash...and/or your time as a volunteer. OCFC is a 501 c (3) non-profit. Unlike some organizations that make pleas for cash over the phone, the clinic is all local and all legitimate. Every penny and hour you give stays right here in Orange County helping your neighbors. Donations can be mailed to P.O. Box 441, Orange, VA 22960 or call (540) 672-3530.

And mark down Feb. 12, 2011 on your calendar. That's when the free clinic will hold its "Share Your Heart for Healthcare Valentine's Dinner and Dance."

dane things like paper towel holders. "We don't have anything as far as furniture goes," she laments.

And then there are the consumables like urine cups, thermometer sleeves, exam table paper. "I'm real frugal. I'm cheap," laughs Brown, but she adds, "we go through a lot of ink and a lot of paper. That's a huge expense."

OCFC also plans to offer patient education classes on topics such as smoking cessation, diabetes management, weight loss and healthy nutrition. And once in its new home, they hope to have daytime hours in addition to the usual Tuesday evening walk in clinic. That would require a paid nurse practitioner; yet another expense for which donations are desperately needed. And then, of course, more volunteers...always more volunteers.

So where does the new health

care bill come down on all this? Dorren Brown has looked through the legislation and concludes, "The free clinic is not going out of business anytime soon because there's still a big gap." Like many government programs, money is not going where it can do the most good. It's not going to organizations such as the OCFC which is riding point on the health care battle, right up there where it's needed, where the sick people are. No, the bill, as written, muddles about with costly and confusing insurance requirements instead of picking up the kind-eyed woman and the twenty-something who have fallen through the health care cracks.

"Hopefully it will go in a good direction," says Brown. "But right now, we know, no matter what, we will always have a need for a free clinic. That's just not going away."



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Orange County Free Clinic Executive Director Dorren Brown comes to the free clinic from a 31-year career as a school teacher and principal.



A Tale of Three Miracles

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
William Simek came early to the Orange County Free Clinic to be sure he would have a place in line. When it's cold outside, the Orange County Health Department bends its rules about not letting anybody inside until after 4:30 p.m.

Some Tuesdays, they start lining up as early as 3 pm. The line stretches along the Orange County Health Department building on Madison Road, through the parking lot, up to the homeless shelter. Some folks even bring lawn chairs. If you didn't know any better you'd think they were waiting to get tickets to a rock concert.

But this is a tad more urgent. It's first-come, first-serve here, and they can only take the first 24 in line. So, if you want to see the doc, you'd better get here early. A few Tuesdays ago, they stood there in the pouring rain, until the health department bent its rules and let them into the waiting room before 4:30. They're really not supposed to do that, but the alternative is worse than the rule: someone comes down with pneumonia while waiting to see the doctor about the sniffles. They let them in early when that bitter cold snap hit too, but the line wasn't as long then. Who wants to lower their blood pressure by freezing to death?

It's another typical Tuesday at the Orange County Free Clinic.

OCFC Executive Director, Dorren (Doe-reen) Brown sits at a tiny table down the hall. She is the last person a patient sees. She interviews every one, answers questions, and checks them out. Many of them she knows by name.

Like this weary, kind-eyed woman who asks not to be identified because, "I feel embarrassed to have to be here; it's so degrading." Her husband's group insurance dropped him when he went on Medicare. But she's not 65 quite yet. So, with no insurance and no Medicare, she has fallen through the cracks. Still, her beautiful eyes smile wistfully. "This is a wonderful facility," she whispers. "They're so compassionate. I don't know what I would do without them." Her sentiments are echoed throughout the waiting room.

On this particular night, because of the cold, turnout is light. Brown says the record is 48 patients in one night. But they try to hold it to 24, because there's just so much that two physicians can do after a full day's work at their own practices. Still she says, "I don't want to turn anyone away."

The ailments run the gamut. "A lot of acute care, especially during the winter months; a lot of colds coming in, flu, coughing, your regular wintertime ailments," she says. And then there are the chronic illnesses, such as diabetes. "That's probably our number one ailment, diabetics, hypertension, high

"I would be dead if it weren't for y'all."

blood pressure, high cholesterol patients." And then there are the biggies like... cancer. "Unfortunately we do have some very serious illnesses. We have cancer patients. We just had one pass on us last week, which makes me very sad." Her eyes cast down. "We've had colon cancer, we've had bladder cancer that we detected, sent them to UVa, referred them to UVa. They're now cancer-free, which makes us very very happy. And they do all their follow up with us."

There are many miracles here. But as is usually the case, miracles don't just happen; they are forged from hard work.

Miracle number one: the patients, themselves. Brown tells a story how the volunteer doctors at the free clinic detected bladder cancer in a woman. They sent her to the University of Virginia Medical Center, where she qualified for financial assistance. A few months ago, the patient called Brown to report, "I'm cancer-free now. I'm still doing my chemo, but I'm coming Tuesday to see you." Brown quotes her as saying, "I would be dead if weren't for y'all."

That's just one miracle story. There are 1,014 others. That's the number of patients who came to the free clinic this past year. And, by the way, that number is 40 percent more than year before. In fact, every Tuesday, between 5-7 p.m. new patients join the throng that walks through the health department's doors seeking free medical treatment.

The health department loans the use of its building after hours to the free clinic as long as the clinic doesn't overlap services. "We don't do gynecological, we don't do birth control, or STDs. We get calls all the time for those particular things, but what we have to do is refer them to the health department."

In return the health department refers everything from the flu to diabetes to the free clinic. OCFC treats eligible patients from 5 p.m. until as late as 9:30 p.m. every Tuesday. It's also open on an appointment basis the first and third Thursday evenings.

To qualify as a patient, Brown explains, you must pass three tests: be an Orange County resident, which you can prove by producing a driver's license, or just a piece of mail that shows your address. "Then," she continues, "you cannot have any kind of insurance, and that includes Medicare and Medicaid. And then the third qualification is, we look at the federal poverty level, and so they have to be at 150 per-

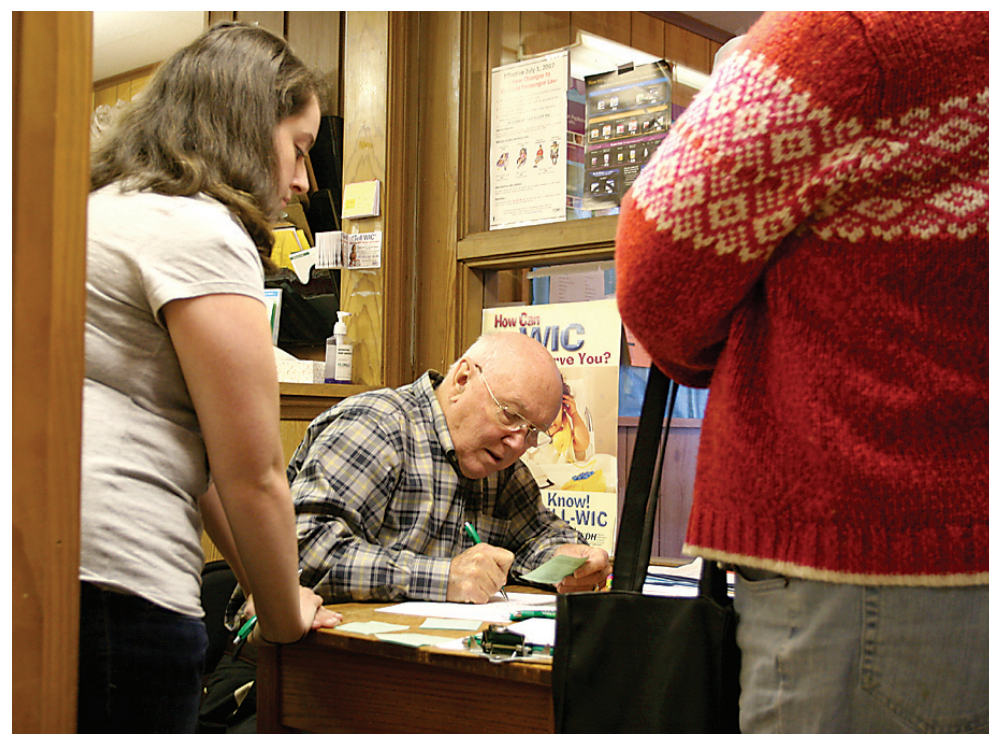


PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Volunteer Bob Vasquez checks in a patient at the Orange County Free Clinic as Rachel Leach of Orange County High School organizes medical history files.

cent of the current federal poverty level." For a family of four, that works out to an annual income of \$33,000.

"When I first started, they were working," says Brown of the typical OCFC patient. "Just the working poor; didn't get insurance; couldn't afford it. Then, that second year, people started losing jobs, and so we started seeing more and more. Most of our patients now have lost their jobs, so they're not working at all."

And now that unemployment has run out for many, there's nothing left. Some folks live in their vehicles. "They're sleeping in their vans and their cars!" she says aghast. Some don't have cars so they can't even drive to the clinic. Many patients understandably suffer from what she terms "situational depression."

Dorren Brown notes they're also seeing a lot of twenty-somethings these days; young adults who live at home because they can't find a job but are too old to piggy-back onto their parents' health insurance anymore. The OCFC does not take children because they are covered by Medicaid. And they don't take Medicare recipients. But they do take all the people in between who, like the kind-eyed lady who did not want to be identified, have fallen through the health care cracks.

Just about everybody who applies, qualifies for treatment. "Most of our patients that come to

us are eligible. We find very few that we have to say 'Sorry you're not eligible,'" continues Brown.

The next step, once all the paperwork is completed, is the patient is issued a six-month card, which they need to produce every time they come to the clinic. The card also identifies them for prescriptions. And herein lies the free clinic's biggest expense, and possibly biggest benefit. "If a patient is on a generic medication, we have a partnership with the Orange Pharmacy and the Wilderness Pharmacy. And what we do, the doctor will write the prescription, the patient will take the prescription with their little card to the Orange or Wilderness Pharmacy, and they'll have a \$1 co-pay for the medication. We pick up the rest." That bill runs the OCFC \$6,000 per month, up 81 percent from last year!

The only medications the free clinic cannot prescribe are for pain, such as opiates, narcotics and the like. "We've had a handful of people who have come in and we know that they are drug-seeking," nods Brown. How do they know? "They get mad and they storm out."

The free clinic is more than a visit with a doctor. "We are their medical home," says Brown proudly. "We really are because we do more than a regular doctor. We just do... We hold a lot of hands, and we do a lot of follow-up care."

This conversation is taking place at Dorren



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT
Morgan Hughes of the Germanna Community College nursing program takes Dianna Tyler's blood pressure as first volunteer nurse Ophelia McClung looks on.



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT
Dr. Michael Sylvester is one of about a dozen local physicians who donate their time each month to the Orange County Free Clinic.

Brown's regular daytime office in the basement of the old library on Belleview Avenue in Orange. It is from here that she makes follow up calls to the patients who were seen Tuesday night. It is here that she painstakingly transcribes handwritten medical charts to the computer. "I transcribe it all; their medical history, their medication history, allergies, the whole works." It is here that she does additional screenings, makes appointments for the Thursday follow-up clinics.

Dorren Brown comes to this position from a 31-year lifelong career in education, first as a teacher in the Madison County public school system and then as a principal in Charlottesville. She has no medical background but heaps of administrative experience and common sense. Still, the learning curve has been steep.

"This is totally different. I have learned a lot!" she says breathlessly. "My job is so rewarding. It really is. And it's so different... I get all the stories. My volunteers, they're there, they do their thing; they don't necessarily get to hear the phone calls. 'Dorren, thank you guys so much. I feel so much better.'...It's too bad that everyone can't hear the gratitude in our patient's voices when they call us and let us know how they're doing."

"We truly are saving lives," she continues,



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT
Graciela Pereira, from Lake of the Woods, waits to see a volunteer doctor at the Orange County Free Clinic.

"and our patients are so appreciative of us and our volunteers. We couldn't open our doors without our volunteers."

And that's miracle number two: the volunteers. With the exception of Dorren Brown and part-time assistant development director April Taylor, this organization is 100 percent volunteer run: volunteer doctors, volunteer nurses, volunteer clerical help. On Tuesdays, as many as a dozen come from as far as Lake of the Woods to set the clinic up from out of a store room on loan from the health department. Before the clinic opens its doors, there are nurse's trays to supply, carts to wheel, exam tables to prepare, medical histories and charts to coordinate. When you, as a patient, come through the front door, you are checked in by a volunteer, you are screened by a volunteer nurse, your vital signs are taken by a volunteer physician. All told, there are 60 of them.

Carol Roddy is a retired registered nurse. She used to come here every Tuesday night. Now, she recruits and schedules the nursing staff. Of the doctors she says, "They've worked a full shift. They start off usually at 7:00 in the morning and then they come here and work some more. And so it's hard." Yet, she points out that the roster of about a dozen volunteer physicians is virtually unchanged since the clinic

started two and a half years ago. They've even picked up a few new ones. "Good volunteers burn out," she continues. "They get tired after awhile. So, we need volunteers and money."

Back in July 2007, the very reason the free clinic came into being was because of its volunteers. "Pretty much they showed up, and they're still showing up," notes Dorren Brown. "We live in a good community, a very giving community."

And therein lies the third miracle: the donors. Culpeper Regional Hospital provides X-rays...for free. Lab Corp does blood work...for free. "We're talking about thousands and thousands of dollars worth of blood work per month that they do for us," points out Brown.

Asked what the free clinic would like to see under the tree Christmas morning, Brown responds unhesitatingly, "We always have a need for donations and volunteers...fundraising is huge and we know everyone is strapped. We have donors who are faithful to us every year, and we're noticing that we have ones who gave big when we first started in

2007 and 2008. But hard times have hit them too. So, donations are going down. Our medication bills are not. Our total population is not."

The free clinic manages to scrape by on a \$178,000 annual budget. Needless to say, despite dedicated donors and volunteers, it is desperate for money. That need will become even more desperate come this April when the free clinic and the Piedmont Regional Dental Clinic (see *Insider: Mission of Mercy*, April 1, 2010) will open their doors together in the former Nova Care facility in Colonial Square Shopping Center in Orange. With the PRDC as its partner, they hope to expand services and hours. Dorren Brown says there is definitely a need. "Out of 10 phone calls that I get a day, I would say six of them are dental-related. There is such a need for dental care, and that affects everything. That affects every part of your body."

Of the Nova Care building, Brown exults, "It's bright. It's sunny. It's clean." But there's a scary side to it as well, despite the \$1 a month rent. Come April, the Orange County Free Clinic will have to pay utilities and upkeep and insurance. "Talk about a Christmas list," shudders Brown, "we have to equip and supply it, furniture and everything. That's what we're working on right now, seeing where we can get that." They need office modules, carpeting, three exam tables, chairs, desks, waiting room furniture, even mun-