

Open hearts, open doors

By Jessica Pearce Photos by MITCHEL BARRETT | Posted: Tuesday, May 26, 2015 11:43 am

Philanthropic women share a common goal: Helping those in need

Donna Dunn, executive director of the Body of Christ Community Clinic in Belton, chats casually with Dennis Roy, a volunteer pharmacist at the clinic. In her office, with its brick red accent walls and fresh bouquet of daisies on the table, they talk about everything from different medications to the weather.

Unlike traditionally stark medical clinics, a feeling of peace and relaxation extends from Dunn's office to the waiting room outside, where patients can wait surrounded by several artistically rendered crosses and a brightly painted mural of Jesus blessing little children. It is clear from the surroundings that this clinic, which opened to the public in June 2010, was founded on faith.

The role of executive director is a second career for Dunn, who worked 15 years for Scott & White Healthcare, first as a secretary for cardiology and then as the marketing coordinator for the cardiology department. While a marketing coordinator, she attended many health fairs. During one fair, she met Caroline Insall, who told her about a task force composed of several area churches that was working to form the first free health clinic in Belton. Insall, the clinic's first executive director, stayed in touch with Dunn, and asked her to volunteer as a receptionist when the clinic opened.

Initially the clinic was open only one night a week, so volunteering was not an imposition to Dunn. While she continued working full-time for Scott & White, she began to feel the tug of a new love on her heart. "It was so great working with the patients and making them feel at ease," she said. "I just fell in love with it."

In 2011, after volunteering for six months at the clinic, Dunn said, "I kind of got restless. I loved my job at Scott & White, but I began praying about finding a ministry to get involved with. In my mind, I wanted to do foreign missions." Dunn discovered that the answer to her prayer, however, was much closer to home.

For family reasons, Insall stepped down as the clinic's director in 2011, and asked Dunn to apply for the position. "I went into the interview just thinking it would be a good experience," Dunn said. "I never



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dreamed I'd have a chance. When they offered me the job, I prayed a lot about it." Dunn said she felt that God was opening a door of ministry to her, even though it was not what she'd thought it would be.

She initially continued working full-time for Scott & White while working with patients on clinic night and working alone at the clinic on other evenings, but by the end of 2013, when the clinic began expanding its patient hours, she said she began to feel "burnt out" working both positions. "In January 2014, I decided to take a huge leap of faith and jumped with both feet into the world of nonprofit," she said.

"It's been interesting," Dunn continued. "In a nonprofit, you work around your volunteers' schedules. It's definitely a challenge." Dunn is currently the only paid full-time employee, though she has three hourly employees. She said she relies heavily on prayer and on the goodwill of her team of medical volunteers. "It is hard for some of our patients to accept charity," she said. "I love watching how our volunteers interact with them."

The clinic provides basic medical care and dental hygiene for more than 50,000 uninsured people in Bell County. "We take care of their health needs and minister to their spiritual needs as well," said Dunn. "We're here to be Jesus' hands and to serve the poor in our community."

Dunn would like to see the Body of Christ Community Clinic expand to full-time hours and also expand its current dental services into a separate, full-time dental clinic. She said they will need many more volunteers and the funding to pay for more permanent staff members. The clinic is currently funded entirely by private donors, including several area churches, United Way and by individual support. On a more personal note, Dunn added, "Having a secretary to answer the phones would also be great."

Dunn described the reason she has chosen to serve the Belton community saying, "I have a heart for the folks we serve; my life is so far removed from these people. You often think of the poor as being somewhere overseas, but they're right here."

Caring for families

Susan Bolton, executive director of the Ronald McDonald House in Temple, ushers house guests into the garden where she shows off multi-colored snapdragons, pinching open the blossoms to display their "snapping" ability. Wagdi Mabrouk, whose infant daughter is being treated at the nearby McLane Children's Scott & White Hospital for a rare infection, said he is from New York City, and had never seen what snapdragons can do.

Bolton uses these little experiences to take her guests' minds off the reality of their children's fragile state at the hospital. The house is conveniently located in a real neighborhood and is set up to provide a home away from home at little to no cost for parents and families with children who face extended hospital care.

Being the executive director for the past 25 years is a natural fit for Bolton, whose roots go deep in the Temple community. “My family has been here for generations,” she said. “My dad’s picture is on the Temple Chamber of Commerce wall. I feel a sense of heritage here.”

Bolton believes that she was asked to step into her current position because of “divine intervention.” “My sister was talking to the house board, and my name came up,” she said. While most people there knew her through her family and considered her a good fit for the role, Bolton had never considered it for herself.

Raising her son and daughter, she was unsure if she wanted to detract from the amount of time she could give her own family by assuming the role. “I was perfectly content being a stay-at-home mom,” said Bolton, “but by my working here, my kids got to see so much. They got to know people with illnesses much worse than they ever had, even though they both struggled with asthma.”

Bolton’s motivation behind her work is intimately tied to the house itself. “I love this house,” she said. “I get goose bumps when I talk about it. It’s the most wonderful place you never want to have to be.”

Bolton continues to plan for the house’s future, refusing to become complacent in her leadership. “We’ll have to expand,” she said. Currently, the house has 18 bedrooms with private baths, but it is short on storage space. She is using nine extra rooms for storage that could be converted to bedrooms if more funding becomes available for additional storage space.

Aside from monetary donations, though, Bolton currently has an entire laundry list of services that volunteers can provide, including cleaning, baking and cooking meals for house guests.

As the unofficial house mother, Bolton said that over the years it is the people, including the guests, staff and board members, who have fueled her passion to serve. She recalled a year when one family was staying in the house over the holidays. “I was a real grouch,” she said, “because I had to work there Christmas Eve.” Her perspective changed, however, when the whole family streamed in with reindeer antlers on and took over the common living room. They had Christmas music playing and brought in all their gifts to celebrate Christmas right there. Bolton later found out their girls said they thought it was the best Christmas they ever had.

Some families return to stay at the house for regular visits when a child needs multiple treatments at the hospital for chronic conditions. Bolton remembered Len, a special boy who had the rare Cornelia De Lange Syndrome, which causes affected children to have many physical and mental challenges over their lifetime. He stayed at the house several times with his mother, and Bolton attended Len’s high school graduation when he was in his twenties. “When he walked across the stage, the whole crowd cheered,” she said. “He died just a few years later, but he touched my life.”

While Bolton described the bond she feels with her guests, it is clear the feeling is mutual. Patricia Lopez, a current house guest, suffered from preeclampsia during her pregnancy, which made it necessary

for her to deliver her son Oliver while he was still premature. After her delivery, she moved into the house so that she could be near him at the neonatal intensive care unit at Scott & White. Baby Oliver weighed only 2 pounds, 9 ounces at birth, so Lopez remained at the house while he continued to gain weight in the hospital. “I like it here,” she said. “It’s a different experience. I thank God for this place and for everyone here.”

Mabrouk, Bolton’s guest from the garden, had much to say about his stay at the house as well. “This has been such a blessing for us. I can’t say enough about this place; they’ve been so good to us here.”

While Bolton works tirelessly to provide house guests like Mabrouk and Lopez a sense of normalcy during a time of high stress, she declared, “There’s nothing I could do to make up even a tenth of what they’ve done for me.”