

Ministry of Mercy: Lestonnac Free Clinic expands its reach to San Bernardino

By Malie Hudson



The dream of providing medical care to the poor in San Bernardino came true last Fall when Lestonnac Free Clinic finally opened the doors to its San Bernardino facility.

The idea arose when Lestonnac Director Edward Gerber would travel to San Bernardino to attend committee meetings at the Diocesan Pastoral Center.

“As I’m driving down Waterman [Avenue], I could tell there was a need,” he said.

Gerber’s infant son was once a patient of Lestonnac in the City of Orange 22 years ago when he fell out of bed and broke his clavicle. Gerber had just lost his business, had no health insurance and no savings. His church referred him to Lestonnac where they provided the medical care his son needed. So he understood the need to provide free medical care in a marginalized community like San Bernardino.

Many discussions began between Gerber, Bishop Gerald Barnes and Sister Margo Young, C.P.P.S., MD, who is also a physician at St. Bernardine Medical Center. Sister Young already knew of the need because she saw many patients in the hospital’s emergency room that could not be admitted because they had no health insurance. She knew that a free clinic would be a solution to the crisis.

They were finally able to secure a location at 401 E. 21st Street, directly across from St. Bernardine Medical Center. But the building needed to be remodeled. So Sister Young wrote to her congregation, the Sisters of the Precious Blood, for help with the remodel. They raised \$100,000 by July of 2014. By Fall of that same year, construction began and was completed last February. Because of the long permitting process required by the City of San Bernardino, the clinic finally opened its doors in September.

The first Lestonnac Free Clinic was opened in Orange in 1979 by Sister Marie Therese Solomon of the Sisters of the Company of Mary our Lady. Over the next 30 years, the organization has grown with satellite clinics in Artesia, Buena Park, Compton, Garden Grove, Los Alamitos, Los Angeles, and now San Bernardino. The organization also sends a mobile medical unit to Riverside, Jurupa Valley, Murrieta, Moreno Valley and Perris.

The new clinic in San Bernardino is the product of a collaboration between Lestonnac and Dignity Health. Dignity Health provides the space and utilities and Lestonnac manages the clinic. Under the umbrella of Lestonnac, there are many volunteers who work together to care for the poor in this community. Among them are nurse practitioners, specialists and physicians from area hospitals; students from the University of California, Riverside as well as Sister Young, who volunteers at the clinic every Monday.

“It is just a wonderful collaboration because we have gifts to offer,” Sister Young said.

Patients who enter the clinic are greeted by Medical Assistants Donna Ramos and Therese Gerber. Patients are asked to complete a brief registration form so that the medical provider can determine treatment. A Spanish translator is also provided for patients who may need one. The clinic currently offers basic medical care like hemoglobin A1C tests, EKG, pregnancy tests, urinalysis, breathing treatments, ear irrigation and eventually will offer dental care and ultrasounds.

The clinic is equipped with an ultrasound machine but is still in need of a volunteer technician to operate it. Gerber is already busy working to establish a partnership with Kaiser Permanente physicians that would provide four to five different specialists, including an oncologist and urologist, to create what he calls a “specialty care hub” in the next two to three months. The hub would be accessible to other free clinics who are in need of specialty care, he says.

“Lestonnac runs a very lean machine,” Sister Young said. “But they do not compromise in compassion.”

The entire collaboration is a labor of love for San Bernardino and as it grows during this Holy Year of Mercy, the clinic continues to be in need of volunteer nurse practitioners, technicians, and specialty physicians. If you would like to offer your time and skills, please contact Lestonnac Free Clinic at 714-583-6431.

The clinic in San Bernardino is open on Mondays and Thursdays from noon to 7 pm and on Saturdays from 9 am to 5 pm.