

A FREE DENTAL CLINIC BRINGS

SMILES TO THIS RURAL AREA

By Carla Burgess

Retired police officer Melvin Bowman settles into a chair in the waiting room of the Wyo Dental Clinic. An imposing man, he moves slowly due to the brace on his leg. His foot is damaged from complications of diabetes. He has survived three strokes and back surgery. The financial burden has been overwhelming for Bowman, 65, who retired in North Carolina to be near his wife's family. So when he began suffering from a toothache, it was a pain he decided he'd have to live with.

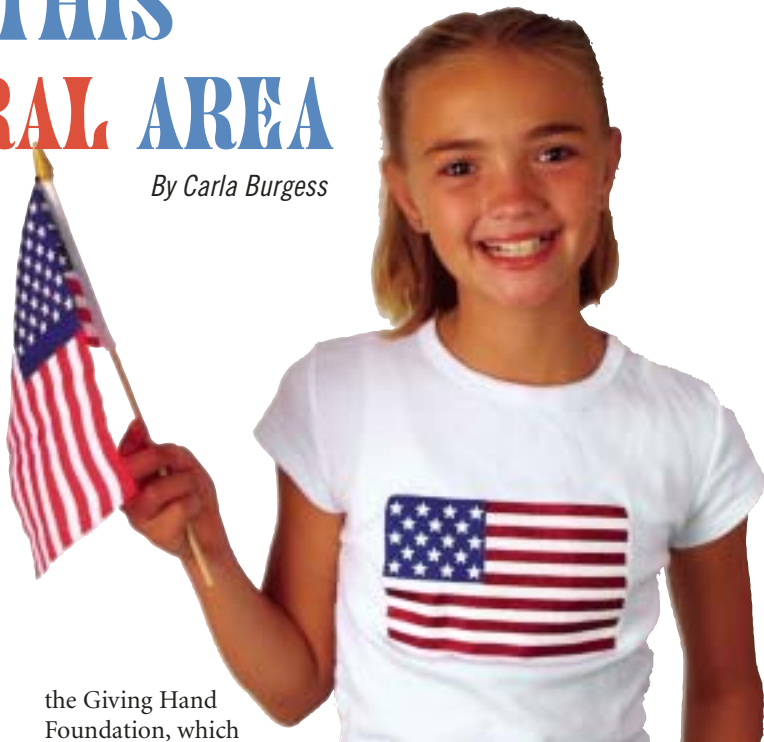
While working in law enforcement for Anheuser-Busch in Williamsburg, Va., Bowman had access to affordable dental care. Since leaving, he hadn't seen a dentist in 15 years. Then one morning at breakfast, he saw a TV news story about the Wyo clinic, a place on the Yadkin and Davie county line west of Winston-Salem where people in the community could receive free dental treatment. He called and got on the waiting list.

Since his first visit, Bowman has had two teeth pulled and two filled. The volunteer professionals at the clinic also have treated his wife. Bowman says Keith Phillips, the clinic's founder, is a "gentle dentist," adding softly: "If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have been able to do it."

Located in the EnergyUnited Touchstone Energy cooperative's service area, the Wyo clinic provides services that include cleanings, fillings, extractions, root canals, and some partial and full dentures. Operated through donations of money, equipment and supplies, the clinic serves people mostly from Yadkin and Davie counties, but also Wilkes and Surry. Largely rural and agricultural, the region's communities have been hurt by loss of textile jobs, a sluggish economy and, in turn, poverty. People often wait until a dental problem is acute before seeking care, often in the emergency room. There, says Phillips, patients usually receive a stopgap such as antibiotics to treat infection. But the root of the problem remains.

"If a tooth is not hurting, going to the dentist is not a front-burner item, compared to some of the other things they face," said Phillips, 46, who also operates a private practice in Winston-Salem. Given a choice between routine dental work and food on the table, low-income families must eat. Free clinics can help ease this burden, while promoting preventive care.

Like many other dentists, Phillips found he was offering increasingly more free services to poor patients in this office. He dreamed of a way to address the need through a comprehensive approach. Meanwhile, he had been making annual trips to Montego Bay, Jamaica, to volunteer at a weeklong, church-sponsored dental clinic. The pool of dentists, students, surgeons, nurses, hygienists, assistants and other support volunteers who made the trip were eager and willing to regularly donate their time. They needed only a destination. And so Phillips started



the Giving Hand Foundation, which now operates clinics in Wyo and Kernersville, as well as seasonal clinics in Jamaica and Paraguay.

"It's been my experience that there's no shortage of people to volunteer," says Phillips. "There are a significant number of folks across the country who would like to start a clinic but have no idea how to go about it, how to find equipment and how to secure facilities." For that reason, the foundation's major goal is shepherding start-up clinics throughout the United States and helping them become self-sufficient. The foundation has given a hand to fledgling clinics in Florida, Tennessee, Minnesota and other parts of North Carolina.

The foundation also provides educational grants and supports world mission trips. It receives donated supplies from manufacturers and dental practices as well as cash contributions from the community. Also, Phillips donates his honoraria from seminars and other professional speaking engagements. And though payment is not required, patients at the Wyo clinic are encouraged to donate what they can to help defray expenses. Quite a few patients are generous with their money, says Phillips, and also their cakes and pies.

Besides the Wyo clinic, which is currently open at least two Saturdays each month, the foundation also supports occasional clinics held in the basement of a Hispanic church in Kernersville. The Wyo clinic has a dedicated facility, a modular building donated by Unifi of Yadkinville.

Phillips credits the success of the clinics to the generous, tireless efforts of many community volunteers. Besides the dental professionals who give their time, many local folk have donated their talents and skills to get—and keep—the clinic's doors open. Phillips' right-hand man is John Lane, a fellow church member who is retired from the Winston-Salem fire department. Lane, a

fix-it guy who keeps equipment running, is a master of improvisation. It was he who fashioned a suction unit for the Paraguay clinic from a \$26 wet/dry vacuum from Home Depot. He also helps Phillips collect used equipment from dental offices to give to other free clinics that the foundation mentors. Lane's wife, Pam, the foundation's secretary/treasurer, affectionately calls the pair "Sanford and Son," noting that the men have crammed their basements full of dental salvage. Pam rode shotgun with John to deliver a truckload of chairs and other equipment to a fledgling clinic in Tampa, Fla., last year.

The Lanes' daughter, Crystal, 17, hung colorful wallpaper. Her boyfriend, Casey Doub, helped with plumbing and vinyl siding. Retired schoolteacher Lillian Groce files charts and schedules appointments. Charlotte and Bob Williard do housekeeping and tend the grounds. Bernie Alspaugh created the Foundation's web site (www.givinghand.info) and multimedia presentations. And countless others helped refurbish the building and install the necessary infrastructure for the Wyo clinic's opening in November 2002.

The clinic also has widespread institutional support. Students in the dental assistant and hygienist programs at Forsyth Technical Community College volunteer at the clinic, receiving class credit and valuable experience in return for their assistance. At a recent "sealant clinic" for elementary school children, dental students applied protective tooth coatings that help prevent tooth decay. The health departments of Yadkin and Davie counties, which screen at-risk children in the schools, also helped advertise the sealant clinic. Phillips said the children were so moved by the experience that they took up a collection to buy a new instrument cart for the clinic.

AT WORK IN WYO

On a snowy day in January, the clinic fills up slowly. The interior is as white and bright as the flakes falling outside. A "free clinic" might summon images of a row of dental chairs in a barbershop environment, but that is not the picture here. The spotless clinic has three private exam rooms, a modest-size waiting room and reception area, and a combination boardroom and office. The walls are paneled in white, and the doorways trimmed in oak. There are homey touches like valances on the windows and framed pictures on the walls.

Gina Humble is busy helping Groce in the office and translating for several Hispanic patients. Humble, the foundation's brand new executive director and first and only paid staff member, is fluent in Spanish. She inspired the foundation to do a clinic in Paraguay, where she had worked as a Peace Corps volunteer. Humble's first major task will be to contract with dentists so that the clinic can extend its hours to include weekdays, and to apply for grants to eventually hire a full-time dentist.

Wearing scrubs and masks, registered dental hygienist Jan Welborn and dental assistant Mae Scales work alongside Phillips. They'll see about 15 patients during the four-hour clinic. Phillips is usually assisted by his father, Ken Phillips, also a dentist, but he is away at a funeral today. As a child, Keith Phillips used to tag along with his dad to a free clinic he started in the North Carolina mountains in the 1960s. Though

the seed for community service was planted in him early, Keith Phillips taught math at a military boarding school for nearly eight years before deciding to follow in his father's vocational footsteps. He graduated from the University of North Carolina's School of Dentistry in 1988.

The Wyo volunteers work with speed and precision—a pace at odds with the frenetic atmosphere of the foundation's Third World sister clinics. While the Wyo clinic has treated about 500 patients total, that many people are seen in a single week in Jamaica or Paraguay. With the exception of an ample supply of anesthesia, there are other vast differences. In the sweltering heat of summer, volunteers trek miles through deeply rutted, muddy roads to toil in a cramped room without air

conditioning. And though strict licensing requirements limit who can work in U.S. clinics, the foreign clinics make use of anyone willing to learn and work hard. Phillips' wife Kim, a registered nurse and epidemiologist, is not allowed to administer anesthesia at the Wyo clinic. But she is a key worker on the "numbing assembly line" beyond the border. Local newspaper editor Andy Matthews, who traveled with the team to Paraguay last summer, was put to work sterilizing instruments and even pulled a tooth before the week was over.

Matthews said he went on the trip purely as a volunteer and didn't take a single note during the week. But upon his return, he was inspired to write a series of articles for the Yadkin Ripple describing his experience. "It was almost a life transformation for me," said Matthews, who made his first journey with trepidation but now can't wait to go back. He said community response to the articles has been affirming and overwhelming. No matter where they operate, these clinics reveal the common threads in impoverished communities everywhere, he said.

An overwhelming similarity is the gratitude expressed by the patients. Kim Phillips recalls with particular affection the shy teenage girl from Paraguay who had been filling the holes in her front teeth with white nail pol-

ish. In exchange for their work, the volunteers got to see a smile they'd not soon forget.

The Brighten and Build Program

The popular consumer trend of tooth-whitening can help The Giving Hand Foundation. Through the "Brighten and Build Program," clients of Keith Phillips' private practice can make a \$200 donation to the foundation and receive a home-whitening kit. The proceeds go to an endowment fund that supports scholarships for students pursuing dental careers and provides travel assistance to mission volunteers. The foundation hopes other dentists will offer the program in their practices. For more information, call (336) 463-2073. The address is The Giving Hand Foundation, 4314 Wyo Road, Yadkinville, NC 27055. Or visit www.givinghand.info



Dr. Keith Phillips at work in the dental clinic he opened in the rural community of Wyo, west of Winston-Salem.

Freelance writer Carla Burgess wrote about the Shallowford Farms popcorn farm in the November 2003 issue of Carolina Country.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield foundation grant will expand North Carolina's network of free medical clinics

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation (BCBSNC Foundation) will give \$10 million over the next five years to help free health clinics across North Carolina.

Free health clinics are private, nonprofit, community-based organizations that provide medical care at little or no charge to low-income, uninsured and underinsured North Carolinians through the use of volunteer health care professionals and partnerships with other health providers. North Carolina has more free medical clinics (57) than any state in the country.

The grant will go to the North Carolina Association of Free Clinics (NCAFC) as part of a partnership between the organizations to strengthen the free health clinic network across the state.

The grant will help expand the number of free clinics and pharmacies across the state to 85. The grant is also expected to allow free clinics to more than double the number of people they serve. The Free Clinics association projects that by 2009, more than 300,000 uninsured patients annually will receive \$150 million worth of health services from free clinics and pharmacies, including 750,000 prescriptions. In 2002, North Carolina's free clinics and pharmacies provided \$60 million of health care to more than 125,000 uninsured patients, dispensing more than 350,000 prescriptions to both uninsured and underinsured patients.

"Many clinics across our state are facing huge fund-raising challenges due to the sluggish economy and layoffs," said John Mills, executive director of the NCAFC. "This initiative by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation will provide the additional support needed to meet ongoing challenges free health clinics face on a daily basis."

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation provides financial support to improve the health and well-being of North Carolinians. This mission is achieved through programs and services funded in response to grant requests, as well as through funding for programs supporting needs identified by the Foundation. The Foundation's primary focus areas include access to care for the uninsured and underinsured, eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities, physical activity, and screenings and education, all with a focus on preventive care.

The North Carolina Association of Free Clinics, founded in 1998, is a private, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that conducts advocacy, research, public relations, resource development, training and technical assistance on behalf of its member free clinics and the people they serve. Headquartered in Winston-Salem, NCAFC offers an accreditation process for free clinics and mentoring for new clinic executives.



**BlueCross BlueShield
of North Carolina**

Members of the North Carolina Association of Free Clinics
(listed alphabetically by location)

Helping Hands Clinic

Ahoskie
(252) 358-7833

Community Care Clinic

Albemarle
(704) 982-6640

ABCCM Medical Ministry

Asheville
(828) 259-5339

HOPE Clinic

Bayboro
(252) 745-5760

The Hunger Coalition, Inc.

Country Roads Mobile Pharmacy
Boone
(828) 262-1628

**Transylvania County Volunteers
in Medicine**

Brevard
(828) 883-4454
www.tcvim.org

Open Door Clinic of Alamance County

Burlington
(336) 570-9800/1300

**Good Samaritan Clinic of
Haywood County**

Canton
(828) 648-8676

Student Health Action Coalition

Chapel Hill
(919) 843-6841

Charlotte Community Health Center

Charlotte
(704) 316-7661

Community Health Services

Charlotte
(704) 375-0172
www.chs-nc.org

MedAssist of Mecklenburg

Charlotte
www.medassist.org
(704) 536-9766, Ext. 111

**Nursing Center for Health Promotion
UNC - Charlotte**

Charlotte
(704) 687-4683

The Community Free Clinic

Concord
(704) 782-0932

Free Clinic of Our Towns

Davidson
(704) 896-0471/107

Senior PHARMAssist

Durham
(919) 688-4772
www.seniorpharmassist.org

Hope Clinic of Elizabeth City

Elizabeth City
(252) 338-6773

The CARE Clinic, Inc.

Fayetteville
(910) 485-0555
www.TheCareClinic.org

WATCH Mobile Unit

Goldsboro
(919) 735-1251

**Medication Assistance Program
Guilford County Health Department**

Greensboro
(336) 641-8030

Greenville Community Shelter Clinic

Greenville
(252) 758-9244

HealthAssist

Greenville
(252) 847-7016

Pitt County Care Clinic

Greenville
(252) 355-5838

Volunteer Medical Resource Center

Hendersonville
(828) 697-8422

**Cooperative Christian Ministries
Health Care Center**

Hickory
(828) 345-0854

The Community Clinic of High Point, Inc
High Point
(336) 841-7154

Lake Norman Free Clinic
Huntersville
(704) 947-1350

Caring Community Clinic
Jacksonville
(910) 938-1688

Helping Hands Clinic of Caldwell County
Lenoir
(828) 754-8565

Davidson Medical Ministries Clinic, Inc.
Lexington
(336) 249-6215

Helping Hands Health Clinic
Lincolnton
(704) 735-7145

Storehouse for Jesus Free Medical Clinic
Mocksville
(336) 751-1060

HealthQuest of Union County
Monroe
(704) 226-2050

Mooreville South Iredell Health Assistance Clinic
Mooreville
(704) 662-6904

Broad Street Clinic
Morehead City
(252) 726-4562

Good Samaritan Clinic
Morganton
(828) 439-9948

Surry Medical Ministries Clinic
Mount Airy
(336) 789-5058

MERCI Clinic
New Bern
(252) 633-1599

Senior Pharmacy Program
New Bern
(252) 638-3657

Community Mental Health Clinic
Raleigh
(919) 608-4716

The Open Door Clinic Urban Ministries of Wake County
Raleigh
(919) 832-0820

Raleigh Rescue Mission Medical Clinic
Raleigh
(919) (828) 9014, Ext. 112

Free Clinic of Reidsville & Vicinity, Inc
Reidsville
(336) 349-3220
www.ncpreventionpartners.org/nccpc47/index.htm

Rockingham Prescription Assistance Program
Reidsville
(336) 349-2343

Roanoke Valley Medical Ministries Clinic
Roanoke Rapids
(252) 308-1261

Community Care Clinic of Rowan County
Salisbury
(704) 636-4523

Good Shepard's Clinic
Salisbury
(704) 636-7200

Helping Hand Clinic
Sanford
(919) 777-0196

Moore Free Care Clinic
Southern Pines
(910) 692-3518

New Hope Clinic
Southport
(910) 278-6705

Senior Care Pharmacy
Spindale
(828) 286-4222

Open Door Clinic
Statesville
(704) 838-1108

Good Samaritan Clinic of Jackson County
Sylva
(828) 586-3146

The Good Samaritan Clinic of Haywood County
Waynesville/Canton
(828) 648-8676

Haywood Christian Ministry
Waynesville
(828) 456-4838

Tileston Outreach Health Center
Wilmington
(910) 343-8736

Crisis Control Ministry Pharmacy
Winston-Salem
(336) 724-7875, Ext. 1044

Community Care Center
Winston-Salem
(336) 723-7904



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