

## **A CENTURY OF HEALING: SISTERS OF MERCY NURTURE BODY AND SOUL**

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ASHEVILLE—Doug Hyneman belongs to no organized religion, yet he believes in ties between healing and "a higher power."

An avid cyclist and runner, Hyneman said that power energized him last week as he recuperated from a biking accident and broken hip. The 44-year-old Asheville man credited his optimism to visits from Sister Carmen Cruz during his recent hospitalization at Mission St. Joseph's Health System.

"I was in a lot of pain and don't have any family here, so I looked forward to seeing her," the Winston-Salem native recalled. "We'd pray and talk about God a little bit ... it kept me focused on the big picture instead of just my little wants and needs."

Sister Cruz, one of four Sisters of Mercy who this fall will celebrate the order's 100th anniversary here, nearly lost her right foot in an auto accident six years ago. Memories of learning to walk again instilled a special empathy for patients like Hyneman.

"It's an experience I can share," said Cruz, a chaplain who ministers primarily to orthopedic, respiratory and surgery patients at the former St. Joseph's Hospital. "I don't have any answers for their problems, but I can lift them up in prayer."

Following the example of their Irish founder, Mother Catherine McAuley, Cruz and her fellow sisters have tended to the physical, spiritual and educational needs of Western North Carolina residents for a century. Today, their 200-employee organization - Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care, Inc. - continues a tradition begun in 1900 when three nuns came to Asheville to open a tuberculosis sanitarium. Whether ill, incarcerated, uninsured, addicted or homebound, WNC residents still find solace through the sisters.

Part of an international order with 123 members based in Belmont, N.C., the sisters for most of their 100 years in the mountains served a state with a Catholic population of under one percent. Despite the influx from other states, registered Catholics in Buncombe County today account for only 3.3 percent of all residents.

But the sisters say their mission to serve the poor, sick and uneducated transcends labels: "Needs don't have religious denominations," said Sister Rosalind Picot, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in North Carolina. "And God gives mercy to everyone."

Teresa Taylor wasn't necessarily seeking divine intervention when she came to Urgent Care South in Skyland on Tuesday. For two weeks, the 36-year-old Canton resident had trouble breathing, swallowing food and dealing with a rash - just after her doctor moved out of the area.

"I called seven other family practice physicians," recalled Taylor, who walked into the sisters' Skyland clinic without an appointment. "They weren't accepting new patients or didn't have appointments available until January."

Though privately insured, Taylor could have received the same treatment if she'd had no health insurance plan. Taylor is among some 30,000 privately insured or industrial patients whose payments allow the Urgent Care centers to treat 24,000 indigent or working poor patients, plus 11,000 Medicare or Medicaid recipients whose plans don't fully cover the costs of care.

"Four thousand people come through Urgent Care and don't pay a penny," said Bill Harvey, vice president of Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care Inc.

At one-third the cost and in a third of the time, Harvey said, the outpatient centers treat patients, 70 percent of whom would have otherwise gone to a hospital emergency room.

Outpatient care has become the sisters' primary focus since they sold North Carolina's last remaining Catholic hospital to Memorial Mission Hospital two years ago.

"We have a pattern of adjusting our ministries to address the current needs," said Sister Picot, recalling the 1998 sale of St. Joseph's Hospital. "Looking out for the poor, women and children and those who have cultures different from the predominant culture ... does not require running a general hospital."

Yet as Sister Cruz and colleague Sister Bernarda Hoff demonstrate, the nuns have not withdrawn entirely from hospital corridors. As a retired nurse, Sister Hoff surveys patients of Mission St. Joseph's Health System to assess the care they're receiving. Part-time teacher Sister Anita Sheerin leads volunteers from St. Eugene's Catholic Church who visit sick and homebound parishioners. And Sister Maria Goretti Weldon is a staff and patient advocate who drops in on the myriad sites where the organization serves WNC residents.

At an Urgent Care center, for example, she might ask a doctor or nurse how they're doing, or sit with a patient in the waiting room.

"For patients and the staff, it's very comforting," said Dr. Lisa Vendel, an Urgent Care physician. "The sisters are very loving and compassionate."

Diminishing numbers of women who are embracing religious vocations raise doubts about who would succeed the Sisters of Mercy locally. But the sisters and their associates seem confident that Catholics and non-Catholics can help maintain what they started.

"Every Catholic adult has the capacity to serve in the ministries we do," Sister Sheerin said. "The spirit of the sisters' service is going to continue through laypeople."

Staff members have adopted the mentality that patients "aren't just diseases and numbers," Vendel said.

"Most folks who work here are committed to the mission of the sisters," she added. "It can be pretty hard and grueling at times, but it's worth it."

To celebrate their Western North Carolina centennial, the Sisters of Mercy invite the public to four community health fairs this fall. From 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. each Saturday, participants can get free screenings including bone density, blood pressure, diabetes, vision, strength/flexibility and posture checks, plus child identification kits from the Buncombe County Sheriff's Department. Dates and locations are:

- **Oct. 28**, Urgent Care South, 1812 Hendersonville Road.
- **Nov. 4**, Urgent Care West, Patton Avenue and New Leicester Highway.
- **Nov. 11**, Urgent Care East, 589 U.S. 70 in Swannanoa.
- **Nov. 18**, Urgent Care North, Weaverville Plaza in Weaverville.

A 4 p.m. Evening Vespers service and reception are set for Dec. 10 at St. Eugene's Catholic Church in north Asheville.

### **TIME LINE—100 years: Milestones of Mercy**

- 1900:** On Nov. 23, a trio of nuns - Sisters Mary Gertrude, Mercedes and Mary Loretta - open the 18-bed St. Joseph's Sanitarium on French Broad Avenue to treat tuberculosis patients.
- 1905:** An expanded St. Joseph's Sanitarium moves to Starnes Avenue, with Asheville native Sister Mary Scholastica Keenan as administrator.
- 1909:** The Sisters of Mercy purchase 22 hillside acres on Biltmore Avenue, where they gradually expand the sanitarium's capacity to 95 beds by 1924.
- 1938:** After the discovery of new treatments for tuberculosis, including home care, the sisters convert St. Joseph's to a general hospital.
- 1952:** Loretta Hall is built behind the hospital to provide medical staff meeting rooms and living quarters for the sisters, who had occupied part of a floor at St. Joseph's.
- 1958:** Extensive hospital renovations include the opening of the Madonna Wing, increasing capacity to 183 patients and 30 newborns.
- 1969:** A five-bed Intensive Care/Coronary Care unit opens.
- 1974:** Under the leadership of Sister Mary James Scholl, a modernized 10-story, 284-bed St. Joseph's Hospital opens north of the Madonna Wing.
- 1975:** The old hospital is torn down and Madonna Wing renovations are completed. A new home for the sisters is built behind St. Joseph's and MAHEC leases Loretta Hall as a family practice center.
- 1983:** Construction of a five-story south wing begins at St. Joseph's.

- 1985:** St. Joseph's Health Services Corp. buys Western Emergency Medical Center in Skyland to launch the first of four Urgent Care Centers in Buncombe County.
- 1987:** St. Joseph's Hospital Foundation is established.
- 1990:** The sisters launch Health Designs to provide health care to juvenile offenders and adult inmates in Buncombe County detention facilities, and to assist WNC businesses and schools with drug screenings, flu shots, worker's compensation issues and more.
- 1991:** ARP/Phoenix, another branch of the Sisters of Mercy, begins offering substance abuse evaluation and treatment.
- 1998:** St. Joseph's merges with neighboring Memorial Mission Hospital. Proceeds from the \$81.6 million sale of St. Joseph's continue to benefit WNC through the Sisters of Mercy Foundation, which supports programs that help women, children, the elderly and the poor.
- 1999:** Sisters of Mercy open a family practice office at the Weaverville Urgent Care center, plus Sisters of Mercy Rehabilitation Services. Former St. Joseph's Hospital president and chief executive officer Sister Mary Veronica Schumacher dies Dec. 3.
- 2000:** Sisters of Mercy Urgent Care, Inc., grows to 200 employees who respond to an estimated 235,000 patient visits annually.

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