

Merry clinic: Low income health provider throws Christmas party for patients and families

Lance Shearer, Correspondent Published 8:00 a.m. ET Dec. 14, 2017



(Photo: Lance Shearer/Special to the Naples Daily News)
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The Neighborhood Health Clinic is all about making people feel good. Most days, that means providing provides quality medical and dental care to low income, working but uninsured Collier County adults using a volunteer professional staff.

Patients are evaluated by a physician, basic laboratory testing is provided as indicated, and patients leave with their prescription medications, all for a minimal contribution — just \$5 to \$25 for returning patients.

But last Sunday, the chief healthcare provider on the premises was Santa Claus. The clinic held their annual holiday party for patients and their families at their facility on Goodlette Road. Dozens of clinic clients brought their children for the chance to sit on Santa's lap and have their photo snapped, enjoy holiday refreshments including Christmas cookies and homemade treats, and receive age-appropriate presents from the staff members and volunteers helping out.



Janelle, 9, Jonathan, 8, and Jaliana, 1, get their turn with the Clauses at the Neighborhood Health Clinic holiday party. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Special to the Naples Daily News)

As well as providing gifts, volunteers baked or bought food to share during the party, and helped match up kids with gifts. Longtime supporters Debbie McInnis and Amy Turner put their artistic talents to work, face painting children and turning them into kittens, reindeer and Christmas elves.

Perhaps the busiest volunteers were Santa and Mrs. Claus. Of course, they were volunteers in the sense that they were “volunteered” for their roles by Neighborhood Health Clinic CEO Leslie Lascheid, who happens to be Santa’s mother and mother-in-law of Mrs. Claus. Son Ryan is a professor at UC Berkeley, and the two just flew in for the holidays, to find out they were being put to work.



A family affair - clinic co-founder Nancy Lascheid, left, and CEO Leslie Lascheid, her daughter, with Mr. and Mrs. Claus, aka Leslie's son and daughter in law. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Special to the Naples Daily News)

It's a family tradition among the Lascheids, with Leslie's mother Nancy Lascheid, a registered nurse, and her late husband Dr. William Lascheid, a beloved Naples dermatologist, the original founders of the clinic.

As usual, Santa got top billing, while Mrs. Claus — does she even have a first name? — made herself useful and kept smiling, despite being eternally relegated to the role of second banana. The children's personalities came out when the time came for them to get close to Santa, or climb onto his lap. Some were eager, ready for the presents that awaited, but some of the younger kids wanted nothing to do with the bearded stranger in the funny red suit. But all gathered around when Santa read out loud "The Night Before Christmas," and led the group in singing Christmas carols.



Amy Turner, right, and Debbie McInnis face paint kids. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Special to the Naples Daily News)

As “A Charlie Brown Christmas” played silently on the big screen, and client families conversed in English and Spanish, with the kids showing off their new toys and gifts, Leslie Lascheid looked around at all the families getting just the “medicine” they needed, a healthy dose of holiday cheer. All of Naples and Collier County, she said, should give thanks to the families the clinic serves, for all the hard work they do to keep the community running smoothly.

“Our patients are hardworking families who make our lives easier. They’re the faceless people we often forget about,” she said. “My dad said these are the most deserving people there are. Every one of these adults are working. They have health issues, but they keep on working to provide for their families. It’s great to see the smiles on the kids’ faces.”



Santa Claus reads "The Night Before Christmas" to the group. at the Neighborhood Health Clinic. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Special to the Naples Daily News)

Dr. Paul Jones, a family physician and clinic volunteer, is incoming chairman of the clinic's board. His wife Susan, an RN, is organizing the clinic's signature annual fundraising event. A gourmet vintner dinner, it is scheduled for Feb. 3 at the Ritz-Carlton Beach Resort.

The Neighborhood Health Clinic helps alleviate unnecessary visits to the hospital emergency rooms and the spread of communicable diseases. At this nonprofit organization, 90 percent of every dollar raised goes directly to patient services. Collier County is the only county in Florida that provides no public funding for general medical services. The clinic receives no government dollars, funded entirely by individual donations, foundations, grants, religious and civic organizations.



Some of the smaller kids weren't at all sure about this bearded stranger. The non-profit Neighborhood Health Clinic hosted a holiday party for their patients and their children on Sunday at the clinic facility on Goodlette Rd. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Special to the Naples Daily News)