

Helping, Healing, Holding Hands

Volunteers, the heart of the Neighborhood Health Clinic, better the lives of its patients.

Imagine that you are a single mother, working 30 hours a week, making minimum wage with no health care benefits and now you're too sick to go to work. Who will pay the bills to keep a roof over your children's heads? How will you get better if you can't afford a doctor visit?

This is the reality for an average patient at the Neighborhood Health Clinic. That is, until they speak with an intake counselor, like

Jessica Thomas, CAO of the Naples branch of the national law firm Roetzel & Andress, who can assess their situation and determine if they are eligible to be treated at the clinic—for free.

To qualify for help at the Neighborhood Health Clinic, one must be a Collier County resident between the ages of 19 and 64, working a minimum of 80 hours a month (providing paystubs for themselves and

their spouse—if married). Patients are not charged, but contribute a \$35 donation upon their first visit. Patients also may not be actively enrolled in health insurance, Medicaid or Medicare.

"I personally have never been without health care but I can only imagine what it must be like to have a chronic condition like hypertension or diabetes and not have the access to health care," Thomas says. "It is



LEFT: CRIS RYKER, A VOLUNTEER INTERPRETER, STANDS IN THE MEDICINE ROOM AT THE NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH CLINIC.



JESSICA THOMAS HAS BEEN VOLUNTEERING WITH THE CLINIC 15 YEARS AND CURRENTLY HELPS AS AN INTAKE COUNSELLOR.

just amazing that this clinic can do that for the working poor in Collier County.”

Thomas started volunteering at the clinic about 15 years ago when she met Nancy Lascheid, co-founder, at a social event. At that time, Thomas says that the clinic was just getting its wings. Since then, Thomas has met many patients who have truly touched her heart and changed the way she sees the world.

Thomas says that the clinic works with St. Matthew’s House occasionally, treating the working poor that are left with no other option than to live in the shelter. “Before I started volunteering at the clinic, I had this idea of what I thought homelessness was.”

Thomas went on to explain that she once saw a girl she recognized as an employee at a shoe store that she frequents. “She works there part time and she can’t get enough hours to support herself ... that’s not what you expect from homeless.”

Thomas speaks fondly of another patient, a single mother who comes to the clinic monthly with her two boys—who Thomas notes are always dressed to the nines. “The one little boy is in kindergarten and he speaks English, the other one is two years younger and he doesn’t speak English, so the one that’s in kindergarten does all the speaking for the little one, who wants a sticker, wants to color, that type of thing.”

While this little guy may have his big brother to help interpret

for him, there are some adult patients that come in without any English-speaking skills. That is when interpreters, like Cris Ryker, come into play.

Ryker, who has no medical background, learned to speak Spanish as a child from her Nicaraguan grandparents—who spoke no English. “I had no vocabulary for medical terms. My first three months I walked around with a dictionary in my hand—I didn’t know how to say veins and arteries.”

Now, after almost six years at the clinic, Ryker has retired the Spanish-English dictionary. However, she does from time-to-time consult her smartphone.

Ryker adores the patients and their gratefulness. “They’re so happy to have the help,” she laughs, “they just kind of grab your hand when it’s all done and say, ‘thank you so much.’ ... I get so emotional when talking about these people.”

Ryker is also on the committee for the Gourmet Vintner Dinner—formerly known as the Block Party. In fact, for the past six years, she has gone above and beyond to ensure that they raise the funds needed. Each year, Ryker invites her friends to dinner at her house, and in return they must buy a ticket to the event.

Ryker is in the clinic multiple times throughout the week, usually averaging about 10 hours a week. “I always tell people, ‘I get much more out of the clinic than the clinic gets from me.’” ❀