

Alumni Spotlight

The end of an era

A pillar of New Haven's health care system retires after 40 years at the helm of the Fair Haven Community Health Center.

By Lindsay Whalen

Outside Branford's historic shoreline Owenego Inn, the crowd gathers on an early June evening. Clear skies and the setting sun offer a postcard-perfect view of Long Island Sound, and a trio of youthful women in colorful cocktail dresses poses for a picture along the edge of the outdoor patio. A group of older women chats nearby and other guests spill onto the freshly mowed lawn and wander down to the beach below. Their laughter echoes over the water.

At the Inn's entrance, a circle forms around an unassuming woman, willowy at 67 years old and dressed in flowing and vibrant layers that recall a long-haired youth. She is surrounded, but she smiles and takes time to hug and converse with each new guest.

The woman everyone has come to celebrate this evening is Katrina Clark, M.P.H. '71. The executive director of Fair Haven Community Health Center (FHCHC) for 40 years, Clark retired at month's end, a tenure that saw the clinic grow from a volunteer-staffed initiative into a critical part of the city's health care network, with an annual budget of \$12 million, some 65,000 patient visits a year and a reputation that extends far beyond Fair Haven.

A calling

For Clark, service has been a lifelong calling first heeded in 1963. "I really was one of those children of the sixties and was a freshman in college [Cornell University] when Kennedy was assassinated," she says. "I made a commitment then that I would do something that he had asked us to do."

For Clark, that *something* meant joining the Peace Corps, a decision that connected her to a family legacy of good works. Her father, Lincoln Clark, a professor of economics, was involved in relief efforts for postwar Europe and was one of the founding directors of Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, more commonly known as CARE.

Her postgraduation assignment took her to Colombia in 1967. She lived with a family and immersed herself in



Spanish and her work, helping to bring potable water to the small village in the heart of a river valley. In her second year, Clark relocated to Colombia's mountainous coffee-growing region, where she worked with a local nunnery to feed orphaned children.

Meanwhile, back home, society was changing. In April 1968, Clark says, "I opened up the paper, and there was a picture of the African-American students walking out of the student union at Cornell, with the bandoliers and the rifles." A local priest in Colombia owned the only television for miles, and Clark recalls watching coverage of the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in horror and disbelief. The radical shifts of the era became even more apparent when she returned to the states in 1969 to begin studying at Yale.

Clark had gone to Colombia without a clear sense of where her Peace Corps work would lead her. Her experiences there had exposed her to the injustice of health care inequality and solidified a commitment to work for change, but it wasn't until she stumbled upon a Yale M.P.H. fellowship targeting Peace Corps volunteers that a path in public health started to become clear.

The culture shock that Clark experienced in Colombia was nothing compared to what awaited her in New Haven. By the spring of 1970, the campus and the city were reeling. A crowd of more than 15,000 gathered on the Green on May Day to protest the trial of Bobby Seale, a member of the Black Panther Party. Clark gathered with fellow M.P.H. students and others from the medical and nursing schools to set up an on-site clinic for demonstrators. The skills she developed turned out to be essential. "We learned about



Jordan Emont

logistics—how do you find cots, how do you organize a whole medical presence,” she says. Clark had started at Yale believing she would devote her career to foreign service, but New Haven opened her eyes to a profound need at home.

The social and health injustices that Clark witnessed were felt broadly, and local responses were under way. The Hill Health Center, the first community health center in Connecticut, opened in 1968, and in the then predominately Puerto Rican and Italian-American neighborhood of Fair Haven, plans for a new clinic were forming. In August 1971, as an initiative of a local community advocacy group, the Alliance for Latin American Progress, the clinic that would become Fair Haven Community Health Center opened in what is now the Christopher Columbus Family Academy. The founding mission—to provide quality care to neighborhood residents, regardless of their ability to pay—remains FHCHC’s guiding principle.

Operating two evenings a week, with an all-volunteer staff and a budget of \$5,000 from the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, the clinic treated 500 walk-in patients in its first year. The need for health care, however, was overwhelming, and the community-based board began searching for an executive director to steer the clinic’s expansion.

Clark had since graduated from the School of Public Health and was at a low point. She had recently lost her mother and was uninspired by a grant-writing position at Yale. The clinic seemed like an ideal way to give back and to utilize her Spanish skills. The board hired someone else, but Clark’s disappointment did not last long: three months later, the clinic contacted her to say that the first director

Above: Fair Haven Community Health Center in New Haven today has some 65,000 patient visits a year and has become a vital part of the city’s health care network. It was directed for nearly 40 years by Katrina Clark, who retired this summer.

Top: Katrina Clark became executive director of Fair Haven Community Health Center shortly after her graduation from the Yale School of Public Health in 1971. The dates of these two photos are unknown.

hadn’t been the right fit. In June of 1973, and just 27 years old, Clark came aboard.

She would grow up with the clinic, and her unwavering commitment, spanning four decades, has changed Fair Haven for the better, notes U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District.

“The Fair Haven Community Health Center has grown into one of our community’s most respected nonprofit primary health care organizations,” DeLauro says. “Its success and the difference it continues to make in the lives of those it serves are Katrina’s legacy. She has left an indelible mark on our community.”

The early days

Clark secured the funding that enabled the clinic’s growth; the grant-writing skills she had developed at Yale proved their worth. The clinic’s first federal funding was a family planning grant. “That allowed us to hire a midwife one evening a week,” Clark recalls. In this way, Clark laid the foundation for what would become FHCHC’s model midwifery practice. Her next step was to build a strategic alliance with

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Yale's School of Nursing: FHCHC would provide midwife student training and would receive much-needed volunteer assistance in return.

The student nurses' arrival coincided with FHCHC's move into its Grand Avenue home. In 1976, eager to find a permanent site, FHCHC purchased a stately Victorian home on Fair Haven's main thoroughfare. Once a private residence, the building was operating as a funeral home at the time of purchase; it is now part of the three-building unit that FHCHC currently calls home. FHCHC immediately established a presence. "The first task of the



With family members and U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (right) at her retirement party in June, Katrina Clark (second from left) stepped down as executive director of the Fair Haven Community Health Center after 40 years.

midwifery students was to provide posters, which they put around in storefronts," Clark remembers. "Little by little the practice grew." By 1978, the clinic had tripled its hours from 16 to 50 a week and had opened a satellite clinic at the Bella Vista elderly housing complex in Fair Haven Heights. With programs targeted both to beginning- and end-of-life care, FHCHC was able to offer something Fair Haven lacked: comprehensive primary health care.

Assisted by a core staff to help realize FHCHC's vision, Clark persevered, over the next two decades, to build the clinic's program. Fundamental to her continued understanding of the clinic and the community were her Tuesday evening shifts at the clinic's busy reception desk. Working the front desk allowed Clark to keep up her Spanish skills, but more importantly it provided firsthand knowledge

of the challenges. "You need to be literally on the floor to know what's going on," Clark observes.

Clark's attention to the community and its changing needs guided FHCHC's development. In 1982, FHCHC established the state's first school-based health center, The Body Shop, at Wilbur Cross High School, in collaboration with the New Haven Board of Education and the Yale Adolescent Medicine department. The program has since expanded to four more area schools.

Epidemiological shifts also impacted FHCHC's programming. The 1980s saw the onset of the AIDS crisis; Ryan White CARE Act funding allowed FHCHC to respond with a broad range of preventative and clinical services. In recent years, as diabetes rates have soared, FHCHC has made nutritional and physical education a priority, partnering with Chabaso Bakery and others to create the New Haven Farms project, an urban farming initiative that brings community members into the garden and provides fresh produce.

And as the Fair Haven patient population became more solidly Latino, with Spanish-speaking-only Central and South American immigrants now the dominant new group, FHCHC has responded with more on-site translators and Spanish-speaking staff. Throughout, FHCHC has remained committed to affordable, accessible care. Staff is available to help all qualifying patients obtain insurance, and patients who do not qualify receive care on a sliding fee scale. The level of care provided, meanwhile, is priceless for the clinic's patients.

A family environment

FHCHC staffer Erica Perez has been a clinic patient for 10 years and says it's the "family environment" that sets the clinic apart. Of the providers, Perez says, "They are attentive to their patients. They're available, and they really care."

The clinic is almost 50 percent grant-funded, meaning that Clark needed to bring together project-specific funding from disparate sources to create a comprehensive health care program. It's a challenge that Clark sees as her life's work.

"If anything has held me here for so long, it's wanting to achieve that dream of providing true primary care," she says. And for Clark and her staff, care has always been broadly defined: "Community health centers were created to deal with the larger issues in people's lives, not just with

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—U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro

the prescription. We look at the social factors that really impact people's ability to care for themselves. We understand that if a choice is between eating, or heat, or getting a medication, you may well skip the medication.”

Clark's broad, holistic perspective extends beyond the patients to the employees and is essential to FHCHC's culture. Midwifery Department Chair Kate Mitcheom first joined the clinic in 1981 as a recent graduate of the Yale School of Nursing and remembers the family spirit that welcomed her. “It was a grass-roots organization and everything was woven in: your home life, your work life,” she says.

Mitcheom is just one of many staff members and clinicians who have found a career home at FHCHC, but that culture of continuity threatens to change as the clinic loses original staff members to retirement. The change is part of a larger generational shift in New Haven's community health; fellow YSPH alumnus and executive director of the Hill Health Center, Cornell Scott, passed away in 2008, ending 40 years of leadership.

But the community's need for affordable, accessible care endures. At FHCHC a new generation is stepping up, bringing with it new perspectives and skills. Brandon Pervis, a registered nurse at FHCHC, was birthed by midwife Mitcheom; behavioral health clinician Mark Austin's late mother was one of FHCHC's “founding mothers,” the affectionate clinic nickname for the indispensable neighborhood women who served as staff and support during the clinic's earliest days.

Prenatal nurse Tila Suarez was, like Pervis, birthed by a clinic midwife, and her mother remains a patient. FHCHC became a kind of sacred space for Suarez at an early age. “I was a bad asthmatic as a kid, and I have countless stories of the clinic being there for me, opening after hours. My mom didn't have a car, she had a 10-speed bike, and she would bring my brothers and me to the clinic that way. That was our minivan,” she says. Sitting in the waiting room as a child, she imagined her future as a nurse, at FHCHC. “I know it sounds corny, but I just knew I wanted to be here.”

Clark beams when she speaks of the young patients, now grown, who have returned. “There are buildings, the growth, all the numbers. But what gives me the most pride is to see these kids,” she says. Her excitement about the next generation continues when she tells the story of HAVEN Free Clinic, the primary care walk-in clinic founded and

staffed by students from the Yale schools of public health, medicine and nursing. FHCHC houses the Saturday clinic and provides supervising clinicians. To have a new clinic fostered by FHCHC brings everything full circle for Clark. “Watching them really brings me back to our early days,” she says.

Passing the baton

The June celebration marks the end of an era, as Clark hands over leadership to the clinic's new executive director, Suzanne Lagarde, M.D. Clark, who is leaving to spend more time travelling and to be with family, says it's the commitment of the staff and the “new vision and energy” that Lagarde brings that allow her to move on.

Lagarde inherits the clinic at a time of great change. Foremost is the Affordable Care Act and how it might impact the clinic and its patients. It is the promise of universal health care that set Clark, and others, on this journey 40 years ago. Yet, with a large undocumented patient population that is ineligible, the real benefit to the Fair Haven community remains in question. Come what may, the doors to FHCHC will stay open to all residents in need.

As the evening draws to a close, the emotion in the room is palpable. “It almost feels like mom's leaving,” Suarez later says of Clark's departure. And it is the feeling of family that pervades, as the many people from FHCHC's past, present and future gather with others from the New Haven health care community and political leaders, including DeLauro, state Sen. Martin M. Looney and Mayor John DeStefano, to celebrate a woman whom New Haven Health Director Mario Garcia, M.D., MSC., M.P.H. '02, refers to as “an icon.”

Clark is uncomfortable in the spotlight, but with her certificate of “lifetime friendship” presented by longtime staffer Maria Melendez held closely, and her team all around, she gives thanks to all in attendance.

“We built something together,” she says. YPH

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Editor's Note: Katrina Clark received the AYAPH Distinguished Alumni Award on Alumni Day 2013 in October. The award recognizes the contributions and achievements of alumni who have had distinguished careers in public health as outstanding teachers, researchers or practitioners.