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Mission of Mercy earns name by providing medical care to the needy

By Dick Watson
Times Staff Writer

The visiting team locker room beneath the Gettysburg College football stadium is not a very fancy place. There's no colorful paper, paint or pictures on the walls. No soft chairs either; just lockers, plain wooden benches and a concrete floor.

Still, the locker room was crowded on a recent, cold Thursday— not with football players, but with more than 60

adults and children waiting to see a doctor or a dentist.

As it has twice a month since 1995, the Mission of Mercy medical van was at the stadium to provide free medical care and medications to anyone in need.

"Eighty-six percent of those here have no medical insurance," explained David E. Liddle, chief executive officer of the Fairfield-based charity. "The remaining 14 percent can't afford their insurance deductible nor purchase medications.

"They're working people, for the most part," he continued, "who simply can't afford to go to a doctor or dentist. The essence of our ministry is healing through love."

So when they come to the locker room, women and children mostly, nearly 60 percent of whom are Hispanic, they come with a variety of aches and pains, infections and serious illnesses.

Asencion Martinez was there because she believed she had a sinus infection and that her son, Jose, was coming down with bronchitis.

She had left her nursing job in a government clinic in Mexico City six years ago to come to the United States.

The single mom wanted her sons, Jose and Abraham, to have a better education, especially Jose, who has a learning disability and was not receiving the medications he needed.

So she made the journey alone and worked for four years as a maid in a local hotel before she was able to have her boys join her. Now 14 and 15, respectively, Abraham is in the ninth grade at Gettysburg High School while Jose is attending the Lincoln Intermediate School.

Asencion, and now her boys, has been a regular Mission of Mercy patient since she met Cathy Hernandez, an LPN who has been a Mission of Mercy volunteer and interpreter since 1995.

"I love Mission of Mercy," declared Hernandez. "For me, this ministry is what I feel I should be doing and the way I should do it. It's a really complete mission and at the end of the day, I feel I've done a good job."

After checking in with the volunteer staff and waiting their turn, patients are led outside to the medical van to see a doctor and get their medications. While they are waiting, a group of ladies from St. Mary's Church in Fairfield provide lunchtime sandwiches and beverages.

The day the *Times* visited,



Angel Arreguin watches intently as his vital signs are read by Nancy Hoffman, R.N., during the health assessment portion of a visit to the Mission of Mercy health clinic with his mother, Marcela Mena, left. Photo courtesy of Bill Schwartz / Gettysburg Times

dental patients were being treated in an alcove inside the locker room by Dr. Schollosky, a volunteer dentist from Camp Hill. Medical patients were being seen in the van by Don Douglas, a retired doctor from Lewisburg, and Mission of Mercy's Chief Medical Director, Michael T. Sullivan, MD. "By the time we leave late this afternoon, we will have seen 60 to 70 patients," said Dr. Sullivan. "We treat chronic illnesses like diabetes or depression, asthma, high blood pressure, heart problems and more."

For those seriously ill, Dr. Sullivan will refer them to a hospital in Harrisburg or Maryland, where the organization is allowed a certain number of free x-rays, scans and lab work every month.

"We try not to send many patients from the Gettysburg clinic to other area hospitals because that reduces the number of patients we can send from our clinics in those areas," declared Sullivan.

He explained: "We have tried to negotiate an arrangement with Gettysburg Hospital, but they won't talk to us, even though they have seen our work and acknowledged its community benefit."

Founded in 1994, Mission of Mercy now has seven clinic locations in Maryland, two in Pennsylvania and four in Arizona. Gettysburg College offered its football locker room as a site in 1995.

The clinics handle approximately 9,000 patient visits a year plus nearly 900 dental

patient visits and provide more than 21,000 free medications, most of which are purchased by the mission.

"All this was done last year with 450 volunteers," said Liddle. He noted that the organization does not accept government funding and that its income last year of \$1.8 million was divided equally among private contributions, various foundation grants and donated supplies.

Contributions to Mission of Mercy P.O. Box 102, Fairfield, PA 17320 are tax deductible.

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