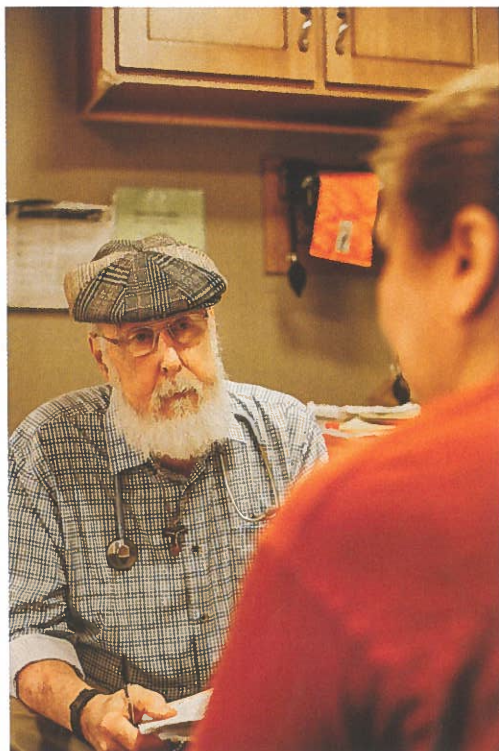


# DOCTOR LEADS TEAM TO RESTORE DIGNITY AND HEAL WITH LOVE

*Mission of Mercy Offers Free Medical and Dental Care Through Mobile Units*



ARTICLE BY EMILY DICKEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTI LYNN PHOTOGRAPHY

If you listen close enough, you may hear a call that will change your life. For Dr. Michael Sullivan, the call from Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, happened in 1991, when he and his pharmacist wife, Dr. Gianna Talone Sullivan, were moved to give up the security of their careers and find a way to provide healthcare to those who could not afford it in the form of mobile medical and dental units, which they named Mission of Mercy.

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*- Linda Ryan, Executive Director at Mission of Mercy*

“I knew this was a special calling and I was anxious to respond,” said Dr. Sullivan.

After serving in the United States Navy, Dr. Sullivan worked in conventional medicine, including 13 years with Geisinger Medical Center in Pennsylvania. During this time, he recalled, he witnessed a change in the way medicine was being practiced.

“Around 1990, I saw a shift that was linked more toward business and politics in medicine, as opposed to a mission to help patients. In turn, my quality time with patients was being impacted,” Dr. Sullivan explained, noting this was why the call from Our Lady was crucial for him to answer.

Both doctors left their careers, bought an RV, and created a traveling healthcare unit with a mission to “restore dignity and heal through love”.

What the medical duo was not expecting was the tremendous need for this type of traveling healthcare.

“Thirty years ago we didn’t have all the social programs we have now, but there continues to still be a need in our society to help those who cannot afford medical care or medicines,” said Jennifer White, Development Director at Mission of Mercy for 26 years.

Medical bills, unemployment, prolonged sickness, family and personal issues, loss of medical insurance, language barriers, daily trials and events beyond one’s control can all have a devastating and lasting impact on a person’s well-being. Over time, patients feel beaten by the system and many may choose to forgo medical care; instead, suffering in silence because they simply cannot afford the services they so desperately need.

According to the 2023 ALICE report collected by the United Way of Maryland and the United Way of Central Maryland, “Of the 2.3 million households in Maryland, 38% have income below the ALICE Threshold of Financial Survival in 2021. These included both households in poverty and ALICE households.”

In addition, more than 29 million non-elderly Americans are without health insurance, according

to the 2021 CDC National Health Interview Survey, which also noted that 1 in 5 American adults do not have health insurance because of the costs, making families choose between healthcare, dental care, medications and basic necessities.

Since 1994, the non-profit organization Mission of Mercy has provided over 222,000 free doctor visits, over 22,000 free dental visits and dispensed more than 442,000 free medications. The mobile units visit throughout the month in Frederick, Brunswick, Taneytown, Reisterstown, Gettysburg and Harrisburg. The organization has been nationally recognized, receiving the Gold Standard Award from The National Association of Free & Charitable Clinics and the 4-Star Charity Navigator Award.

All of this is without any government funding. Instead, Mission of Mercy relies on the support of foundations, corporations, churches, civic groups and individuals.

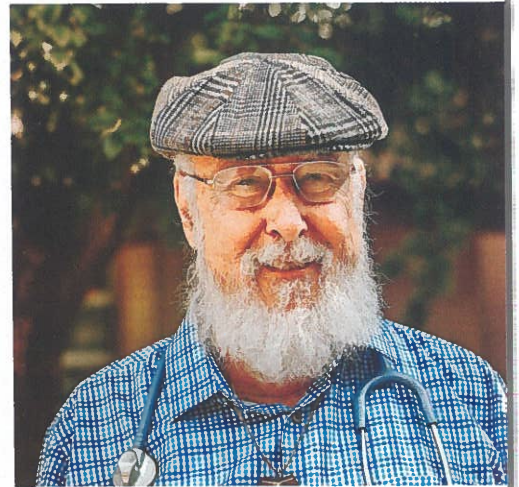
“Usually when we need something, it seems to find its way to us,” said Dr. Sullivan. “Even though there are times God keeps us sweating until the last possible minute, He always pulls through.”

In order to serve as many patients as they could, the doctors first sought out family members who were also moved to follow the call. In addition, Michael and Gianna recruited hospitals for testing and churches for a location to park the RV and conduct medical care.

Before long, volunteers in the shape of highly trained doctors, nurses and other medical staff stepped forward to donate their services and expertise. Today there are about 150 licensed medical and non-medical volunteers at the Maryland and Pennsylvania sites, including: retired and actively practicing licensed physicians, physicians’ assistants, dentists, dental assistants, nurses, nurse practitioners, physical therapists and other health-related professions. Non-medical volunteers serve as registration workers, interpreters and clinic drivers for both the medical and dental clinics.

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*- Sandi Cadigan, RN, Director of Nursing at Mission of Mercy*

"It's a good mission for a good cause. We enjoy helping," said David Keller, who volunteered with his wife, Karen, after seeing an ad in their church bulletin five years ago.

"Volunteers can reach out and tell us in what ways they would like to volunteer," Dr. Sullivan explained. "Here, many feel the initial motivation of why they decided to practice medicine in the first place. Serving with Mission of Mercy is often more pure and more rewarding than practicing in a bigger medical establishment."

What started as a one-RV initiative has grown to include two mobile units. One mobile unit is used for medical, general-practitioner type appointments. This is where patients are seen for check-ups, evaluations, advice on medications and insights on how to treat chronic illnesses. The other mobile unit houses the dental care facility, which includes three dentist chairs and stations inside to provide services such as x-rays, fillings and extractions. With appointments offered from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., each site serves about 50-60 medical patients per day and about 10-12 dental patients per day.

"Through Mission of Mercy, patients are guaranteed to receive quality healthcare," said Executive Director Linda Ryan, who has been with the non-profit organization for 30 years. "We attribute that to all of the well-trained, professional volunteers we have at each site."

"People come expecting medical attention, they leave knowing they received the best care they can receive," said Dave Crome, a four-year volunteer.

Upon evaluation, patients may be referred for further testing, treatment or medication. Some local hospitals offer free services and sometimes free surgeries for patients seen at Mission of Mercy as an extension of the organization's vision to make compassionate care available at no cost to those who seek treatment.

The outreach extends into the community with Frederick Health providing x-rays, labs and bone density screenings. The Maryland Food Bank provides fresh, nutritious food to the Frederick site and the Department of Health provides free HIV testing,

Narcan training and information about free mammograms and colonoscopies.

"We might ask a specialist if they can accept one patient for us per year as a way of giving back," explained Linda Ryan, noting that Mercy Hospital provides up to 12 surgeries per year. "That causes a ripple effect—one act of giving back may be the catalyst for another act."

"This is how medicine should be practiced," agreed Sandi Cadigan, RN, Director of Nursing at Mission of Mercy. "There is a holistic, patient-centered focus here. We take care of the whole person, not just the illness. It's all about who they are and how they are doing in the entirety of their lives. We look at various factors to see how we can help them the most."

Treating the whole person not only includes diagnosis and treatment, said Dr. Sullivan, it reaches far beyond that to include their overall well-being and way of life.

Faith is an integral part of Mission of Mercy, as each day starts with a non-denominational prayer circle before appointments begin. "It's amazing to see people really get along here. It's not about background, religion, economic status or race. We are open about our faith and sometimes that's what we all need to help each other heal," said Sandi Cadigan, who noted the importance of building relationships when helping patients.

"We see our Lord in every person we talk to," said Dr. Sullivan. "Many times there is a crack in their armor for God to get in. That's what I try to help them with in addition to healing their medical needs." Each patient receives a copy of the Surrender Prayer from Dr. Sullivan, which he asks them to focus on for one month and then return to tell him if they have been impacted by it.

"Often patients come to me and they are angry about their illness or their pain, within two to three visits they are thankful and feeling better. That's God's part. Those are the miracles I am able to witness through this endeavor. Those are the miracles that keep me coming back day after day."

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All Free



