

Centro De Salud Familiar La Fe Serves El Paso County

By A. C. Westover (Article first published in Vol. 15, 1997)

V
O
L
U
M
E

15



1997

Health care seemed to be the least of the nation's concerns in the late 1960s, when the Vietnam War was escalating, racial tensions were at their worst and the supposed sexual revolution was occurring. But President L. B. Johnson initiated numerous social programs to serve as avenues of self-help, including the establishment of community health centers. These facilities, including Centro De Salud Familiar La Fe, Inc. (La Fe), became the lifeline of health care to people with little or no income.

In the 1960s, El Paso's Southside was one of the poorest communities in the Southwest, with people living in third world conditions. People living in this area of town, known as the Segundo Barrio, would not seek out medical care until they found themselves extremely ill. Carlos Caballero, activist and former resident of the barrio, said, "People relied on home remedies, *yerbas* [herbs]. They would go to Juárez to seek medical services. It was cheaper."

No medical care sometimes meant people died unnecessarily. Tragic events prompted Nina Cordero, a community activist with the residents of *Los Seis Infernos* (The Six Hells), a tenement complex on Fifth (now Father Rahm) and Ochoa Streets, to campaign for medical services for her community. She and other community members went around the city asking doctors



The La Fe Child and Adolescent Wellness Center (Photo courtesy of Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe, Inc.)

to help set up a clinic by volunteering their time providing medical services to people of the barrio.

The organization opened the doors of its clinic in 1967 one night a week in an apartment. This first clinic was named after Father Harold Rahm, a Catholic priest who had ministered to the Segundo Barrio nearly a decade before. Medical supplies were donated, and people would line up for hours in hopes of seeing a doctor. After a few weeks of treating people at *Los Seis Infernos*, the clinic organizers began to realize the magnitude of the problem; it wasn't just that ambulances took too long to

get to their neighborhoods, but that their community needed a much broader range of medical services.

Salvador Balcorta, then a teen social justice activist known as "El Niño Militante," today the chief executive officer for La Fe, recalled that the clinic quickly became too small. In the mid-1970s, the clinic moved to 608 S. Saint Vrain.

However, examining rooms had to be divided by curtains, private conversations were impossible and sometimes doctors would examine up to two people in one room in order to keep up with the flow of patients. Services expanded to include family planning counseling. The clinic was still being operated by medical volunteers and could only operate a few days a week when they were available. Community doctors donated their time, medical supplies and equipment. Thomason Hospital interns also volunteered their time in hopes of gaining further experience and helping the people of the community.

If no volunteers were available, the clinic remained closed. However, "Dr. [Raymundo] Gardea and Dr. Raul Rivera were always there," recalled Manny De La Rosa, one of the clinic's organizers.

Community pressure led to a decision to rename the clinic. Barrio residents chose a name for the clinic through a contest, with the winner receiving a living room set. As a result, the Father Rahm Clinic became "Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe" (The Faith Family Health Center) which reaffirmed the community's faith in social justice and in each other.

The clinic operated in cramped conditions for months until a Baptist church donated its facilities to the clinic. Residents remodeled the building, enabling the clinic to increase its services, which included primary care, prenatal care, family planning counseling, part-time dental services, referrals to hospitals, laboratories and social workers to facilitate medical and financial assistance to all community members who visited the clinic. Dr. Manny De La Rosa said, "The community members involved knew that this was only a stepping stone to the future."

As change occurred within the city, people began to realize that they could do much more for themselves and their families. The Chicano Movement was in full force when the clinic first opened, another reason for the Southside community to involve itself in the struggle for equal health care as well as equal rights.

"The Second Ward had united for one common fight," recalled Carlos Caballero. "I remember people would donate bandages, alcohol, anything they could give. They wanted a clinic for their families now!"

In the 1980s, La Fe further expanded to its present Central Clinic location at 700 S. Ochoa. A satellite clinic opened in September 1996 at the corner of Delta and Lisbon Streets, and the San Elizario satellite clinic moved to larger facilities in May 1996. These extensions of La Fe Clinic bring services to families who might not otherwise receive medical care.

Balcorta has announced plans for a 25,000 square-foot Child and Adolescent Wellness Center. Thousands of Southside children and teens will have the opportunity to learn the importance of nutrition, drug awareness and preventive medicine through music, computers and theater while receiving the medical care that hard work and faith brought to their neighborhood almost 30 years ago.



La Fe's behavioral health and social services team is located at 608 S. Saint Vrain, the original La Fe Clinic site. (Photo courtesy of Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe, Inc.)

UPDATE 2017

Community outreach by Centro De Salud Familiar (La Fe) has exploded over the years, going beyond providing health care in its now 10 clinic sites to providing opportunities in social services, technology, education, housing and cultural arts. Salvador Balcorta, MSSW, has served as the organization's CEO since 1992. The leadership team includes Chief Operations Officer Robert González and Chief Financial Officer Lucy Rodarte. La Fe's website (lafe-ep.org) and its Facebook page ([facebook.com/centrodesaludfamiliarlafe](https://www.facebook.com/centrodesaludfamiliarlafe)) offer a complete view of this impressive organization.

More than 20 facilities make up La Fe's county-wide network. Ten of these facilities are Federally Qualified Community Health Center sites — extending the organization's reach far beyond its birthplace in El Paso's historic Segundo Barrio.

The La Fe South El Paso Campus on South Ochoa Street features the Child and Adolescent Wellness Center, opened in 1999, and the Central Clinic, their largest one. The Culture and Technology Center, with its strong focus on Chicano heritage, culture and education, features after-school tutoring and classes in computer literacy, ballet folklórico, ESL, GED and U.S. Citizenship Preparedness.

The historic South El Paso campus now offers an Optometry and Optical Clinic, a Women's Health Center, the Behavioral Health and Social Services Department and the La Fe Preparatory School.

The José Román MD Pediatric Clinic on Yandell Drive offers well-child exams, sports physicals and full pediatric care; the La Fe Women, Infants and Children's (WIC) Program is next door. The adjacent Yandell Adult Clinic offers full adult health care and its own on-site pharmacy.

The La Fe Westway Clinic in El Paso's Upper Valley provides full family health and dental care with on-site lab services and pharmacy. Its community center offers tutoring, computer literacy and U.S. Citizenship Preparedness.

The La Fe San Elizario Clinic's full-service family health and dental care center recently relocated to a brand new 17,000 square foot facility on San Elizario's historic Mission Trail.

La Fe's CARE Center, located in East-Central El Paso, opened in 1999 and is the West Texas region's largest and leading comprehensive HIV/AIDS testing, treatment, education and resource facility (lafe-ep.org/lafe-care-center).

Remaining true to its core principles of social justice, this award-winning nonprofit, begun in 1967, has created a countywide network with a breadth of services for the community. It shows no sign of slowing down! ✦