Two Decades of Taking Care to Those Who Need It Most

As Program Reaches Milestone, Director Reflects on Importance, Challenges of Helping Communities

Michele Rigsby Pauley, RN, MSN, CPNP, has seen it all during 20 years of providing healthcare to the poor of Los Angeles.

She remembers her first trip to a public housing development where she discovered 5-year-old children who had never been immunized because the clinic down the road sat in rival gang territory.

She recalls meeting mothers who didn’t have enough money to buy their children cold medicine. And she remembers the boys and girls who were failing school simply because their blurry vision had never been diagnosed or corrected with glasses.

Throughout two decades of directing the COACH for Kids and Their Families® mobile health units, part of the Maxine Dunitz Children’s Health Center at Cedars-Sinai, Rigsby Pauley tackled these challenges head-on.

Working initially as a nurse practitioner and later as program director, Rigsby Pauley said she feels blessed to have helped bring healthcare to the doorsteps of families in need. The program’s two mobile medical units visit

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low-income neighborhoods four days a week, providing vaccines, wellness checkups, vision tests, hearing tests and more to children and parents.

“I am very proud that I can be part of something that’s making a difference in the lives of people,” Rigsby Pauley said. “I am always thinking, ‘What more can I do?’ ‘How do we fix this problem rather than be sad about it?’”

April marked the 20th anniversary of COACH for Kids and Their Families. And, of course, it marks Rigsby Pauley’s own anniversary. Over 20 years, the program has logged nearly 600,000 patient and educational visits.

Many families know COACH’s schedule and use the mobile units as their first line of medical care. COACH nurse practitioners make sure that families receive the medical and social services they need. In addition, COACH and related community programs at Cedars-Sinai include nutrition programs at after-school centers, dental care programs in public schools and Head Start centers, and health workshops in homeless shelters.

Some families have been COACH patients for its entire 20 years. During a recent visit to the Pueblo del Río housing development in South Los Angeles, a young mother showed up with her toddler. Rigsby Pauley treated the woman when she was just a little girl.

“The mom knows us and trusts us,” Rigsby Pauley said. “She is one of many families who follow the mobile unit because they know they will get great care.”

Rigsby Pauley recounts the story of another patient, Olga, as one of COACH’s early successes. Olga was homeless at the time and with an infant when she happened upon the mobile medical unit. She came in for a checkup for her baby, but through the ongoing services of COACH, she was able to get her life back on track. Today, Olga has a home and a career, and speaks publicly about the importance of mobile medical units for the poor.

Rigsby Pauley said COACH’s clients face many obstacles to healthcare, including lack of funds and transportation, language barriers and trust issues. Rigsby Pauley said she is often distressed by the absence of dental health among young children. To respond to this need, COACH set up a “Healthy Smiles” program that teaches dental care to young children and their parents in public schools and Head Start centers across Los Angeles. The COACH mobile medical units help refer clients to low-cost dental clinics, often paying for transportation for families to attend appointments.

Another chronic problem is obesity, both among the children and parents. COACH now has a “Be Healthy, Be Strong!” after-school program in many locations, including the Jordan Downs housing development in South Los Angeles, where kids learn healthy eating habits they can share with their parents.

The COACH program there also features monthly blood pressure screening and body mass index clinics for parents. The clinics started with eight people and now have more than 40, many of whom have seen decreases in blood pressure and body mass.

Since last year, COACH staff members have been trained as outreach and educational counselors for Covered California, the state’s new online healthcare exchange where the uninsured can buy health coverage. In addition, Rigsby Pauley said many of those who have or will get insurance may still not be able to access healthcare, stymied by issues such as language and transportation.

“I feel so fortunate to have a dedicated team and Cedars-Sinai quality care that I can bring to neighborhoods that desperately need it,” she said. “Over time, the neighborhoods may have changed, but the need remains great, and Cedars-Sinai is committed to filling that need.”
The main events revolved around family, food and entertainment as people gathered at Jordan Downs Recreation Center in May and June for special Mother’s Day and Father’s Day celebrations. But during the festivities, people wandered over to the table where representatives of COACH for Kids and Their Families®, a program of the Cedars-Sinai Maxine Dunitz Children’s Health Center, offered tips on healthy eating. Women also had an opportunity to learn about breast health during the Mother’s Day event as Sylvia Estrada, DNP, gave a talk emphasizing the importance of regular screening for breast cancer. It’s all part of the medical center’s commitment to bringing free health information and services to Los Angeles communities where needs are greatest.

**Health Education for All at Jordan Downs**

Seniors Line Up for Free Health Screenings

A line formed outside the Plummer Park community center well before the doors opened at 10 a.m. on May 21 for the West Hollywood Senior Health Fair. More than 500 seniors participated in the annual event, where Cedars-Sinai had a team of 40 healthcare professionals on hand to provide free health screenings and information. Among those performing tests to identify signs of heart disease and diabetes were six Russian-speaking nurses. They were kept very busy. A significant number of the low-income residents at the event were Russian immigrants who do not speak English.
Job Shadowing Gives Students a Chance to Shine

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Annual Showcase to begin.

Their assignment: to engage in one-on-one discussions with attendees about how their job-shadowing experiences at Cedars-Sinai opened their eyes to career opportunities in healthcare.

The Health Careers Academy is part of the YED Program, which turns 21 this year — celebrating a partnership with Fairfax High School that has helped more than 500 students prepare for college and careers. The partnership also includes the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Regional Occupational Program.

Cedars-Sinai employees play a crucial role in the two-year program for juniors and seniors. They serve as mentors, provide job-shadowing experiences and supervise students in paid after-school jobs throughout the medical center. The showcase in April gave them a chance to join students in marking the culmination of a year of working hard, learning and growing.

“The showcase is an opportunity for the students to shine — and for all of us who support them to celebrate how far they’ve come,” said Andrea Perry, YED administrator, noting that the majority of YED alumni pursue higher education in a healthcare-related field, and many go on to careers in healthcare and even become employees at Cedars-Sinai.

At the showcase, students greeted employees, proud parents and members of the community such as Steve Zimmer, a member of the Los Angeles Unified School Board. The job-shadowing experiences they shared included visiting an operating room where a kidney transplant surgery was in progress, getting a behind-the-scenes view of hospital security and watching a radiologist perform ultrasound and MRI tests.

Victoria Hong, an 18-year-old senior, has worked in Imaging for the past two years under the supervision of her mentor, Debbie Kenneybrew, academic program coordinator. Her job-shadow experiences included observing a radiologist, and she’s considering a career in this field or in biomedical research after attending UCLA. “I was very shy before I started this program,” Hong said. “I couldn’t look adults in the eye before. Debbie taught me a lot of skills and helped me to be more outgoing.”

There were many other mentors and supervisors on hand at the showcase to offer students praise and support. Aristides “Max” Garcia, a 17-year-old junior who has been working in Environmental Health and Safety (EHS), had two Cedars-Sinai employees from that department helping him set up his presentation. One was his mentor for the past year, Miguel Magaña, a disaster/surge coordinator. The other was someone he tagged along with during a job shadow: Rigo Meza, a senior security systems analyst. Meza worked in EHS as a YED student himself in the late 1990s, stayed in touch during and after attending college and was hired in 2006.

Garcia is especially grateful for the support he’s received from Magaña and Meza, because he feels a big gap in his life with his two older brothers living in Guatemala. They stayed behind when Garcia’s mother went through a divorce and came to the U.S. Garcia was born years later, and since he couldn’t turn to his brothers for support, “I’ve had to figure things out for myself,” he said.

Garcia, who is interested in a career involving technology and healthcare, said knowing that Meza was in the YED program and now works at Cedars-Sinai gives him confidence that “anything is possible.”

Garcia said Magaña has taught him never to give up. “I didn’t have the easiest childhood, and Miguel gets it,” he said. “In my future, if I ever get to a point close to throwing in the towel, I’ll think of what Miguel told me about never quitting, and I will try not to give up.”

Student Victoria Hong (right) shows her mentor, Debbie Kenneybrew, academic program coordinator, her presentation on imaging fellowship programs.
Embracing Our Community

Cedars-Sinai’s Gift of Food Helps Prevent Hunger

On a recent Friday morning, a white truck bearing the name SOVA — a Hebrew word that means “eat and be satisfied” — pulled up to a Cedars-Sinai loading dock.

Food and Nutrition Services Manager Lloyd Delaney greeted the driver from Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles’ SOVA Community Food and Resource Program (JFS/SOVA) and stepped aside as boxes of oat bran muffins, frozen organic mixed vegetables, cereal, instant mashed potatoes, romaine lettuce and other items were transferred to the truck.

It gave Delaney special satisfaction to know that as he went on with his busy workday, JFS/SOVA’s West Hollywood pantry would be giving this food to seniors, homeless people, working families, disabled individuals and others who face a constant threat of hunger.

Delaney, who once worked in a soup kitchen in downtown L.A., came up with the idea of donating food to JFS/SOVA as part of Cedars-Sinai’s wide-ranging effort to improve the lives of the community’s most vulnerable residents. At the other end of this partnership is someone equally committed to helping the hungry: Fred Summers, director of operations for JFS/SOVA. “We greatly appreciate the support we receive from Cedars-Sinai,” he said. “The medical center has provided wonderful, nutritious food that helps address the hunger issue.”

JFS/SOVA provides free groceries and supportive services to a highly diverse population through service centers in West Hollywood, West Los Angeles and Van Nuys. A total of 12,000 people visit these centers each month. Services include job counseling, legal advocacy, nutrition counseling, food stamp and Medi-Cal enrollment, and referrals to resources such as free medical services, child care and housing.

At Cedars-Sinai, a constant effort to improve the quality of patients’ meals leads to menu changes that periodically result in a surplus of discontinued items and samples from suppliers.

When people come to one of JFS/SOVA’s food pantries, a manager or volunteer helps them make a grocery list based on their needs, dietary restrictions and what’s on the shelves that day. Then the food is put in bags for them with family size in mind. Each individual or family may return once a month, or twice a month if they are homeless and are unable to refrigerate or cook the food.

Many who depend on JFS/SOVA for food and services have long-term needs — “they’re not able to work their way out of poverty,” Summers said — while others manage to turn their lives around.

For example, he recalled one couple, Anna and Jim (not their real names), who were living a “middle-class lifestyle” with Anna taking care of their two children while Jim worked in construction. Then Jim lost his job. Anna found a part-time position but soon suffered injuries in a fall that made it impossible for her to work and required costly medical care.

“They exhausted their resources and ended up on our doorstep,” Summers said. “First we addressed their immediate need for food, then we provided a job counselor and a social worker to help them with other issues.” Jim eventually found a job, and Anna recovered and returned to part-time work. She was so grateful for JFS/SOVA’s help that she became a food pantry volunteer.

Summers noted that 1 in 6 people in Los Angeles is “food insecure” — that is, they don’t regularly have access to nutritious food. This leads not only to hunger but also to health issues, and this is where the missions of JFS/SOVA and Cedars-Sinai intersect, he said.

“A significant cause of the health issues in our community is the impact of a poor diet,” he said. “This is an important link between the work Cedars-Sinai does and the work we do.”

Dennis Schoenrock is pantry manager for JFS/SOVA’s West Hollywood location.
Embracing Our Community

Cedars-Sinai Helps Thousands at Telemundo Health Fair

With a Spanish-speaking nurse at her side to translate, Bernice Coleman, PhD, NP, calmly addressed one potential medical crisis after another in Cedars-Sinai’s emergency triage area during the 10th Annual Health and Wellness Fair presented by Telemundo 52-KVEA and The California Endowment at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

Coleman was part of a Cedars-Sinai team of more than 410 people who provided free health screenings and education at an all-day event in March that attracted thousands of low-income Latino residents. She was stationed in a small room labeled “Emergency Triage” where people were sent when their test results showed dangerously high blood pressure or glucose levels, or other serious health issues.

One middle-aged woman had a blood pressure reading of 180/100; she told Coleman she had run out of medication a week earlier and couldn’t afford to get more. Others in the same age group had blood glucose numbers more than three times the level considered healthy.

Coleman talked to each individual about the danger of having a stroke or going into a diabetic coma, and she urged those at high risk to go to the nearest emergency room. She worked closely with Gail Millan, MN, RN-BC, who coordinated the nursing staff at the event and periodically called in members of an emergency medical services team to consult and assist. Cedars-Sinai physicians also worked in the Emergent Care area at various times throughout the day.

For the entire Cedars-Sinai team, the day was all about preventing health crises — not only for those who needed immediate attention, but also for thousands of people at risk for heart disease, diabetes and obesity, among other health problems.

“Cedars-Sinai is really committed to bringing care to the community and to preventing health problems, and the great thing about this event is that there is a huge following in the Latino population that comes here for healthcare,” said Coleman, an acute care nurse practitioner and clinical researcher. “Some came with folders and showed us their test results from last year. They’re very resourceful about getting the care they need when they don’t have insurance.”

This is the fourth year Cedars-Sinai has been a major part of the annual health fair, and this year’s team, the largest yet, included physicians, nurses, dietitians, pharmacists, podiatrists, educators, advanced practice nurses, clinical researchers, management assistants, managers, directors and others. Also participating were students and alumni from Cedars-Sinai’s Youth Employment and Development (YED) program. Anyone who did not speak Spanish was partnered with a bilingual staff member.

Logan Williams, associate director of the Department of Community Health and Education, organized the team effort and, during a brief ceremony at the event, accepted a proclamation from Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti thanking Cedars-Sinai for its participation in the health fair and for its swift response to help after Los Angeles Police Department officers were involved in a collision with a runaway truck.

Cedars-Sinai provided more than 8,900 screenings during the health fair. The theme of this year’s event was “Get Covered, Your Well-Being Within Reach,” and representatives of Covered California were there to help people learn about their new health insurance options under the Affordable Care Act.
Embracing Our Community

Cedars-Sinai’s team included staff members of COACH for Kids and Their Families®, a program of the Maxine Dunitz Children’s Health Center. COACH provided immunizations, flu shots, nutrition counseling and dental education, and also weighed and measured children to identify those at risk for obesity.

Cedars-Sinai’s largest and busiest area was the section where participants underwent health screenings including blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose, weight and body mass index. Their results were recorded, and anyone whose numbers were outside the norm was escorted to a room where advanced practice nurses provided counseling and referrals.

Among those who received counseling was Concepcion Kalman, a petite 60-year-old immigrant from El Salvador who has high cholesterol. She lives in Culver City and traveled 1.5 hours on two buses to reach the convention center. She has no health insurance, and the last time she received any medical attention was during last year’s Telemundo health fair. Her cholesterol was high then, and it went up over the past year.

“Are you exercising?” asked nurse practitioner Ashley Gianoulis.

“Once in a while,” Kalman said. “I know I have to do more.”

Gianoulis urged her to take brisk walks at least three times a week, eat healthier foods and visit a free clinic to talk to a doctor about cholesterol medication. Kalman left with a resolve to follow this advice. “These are good people who are very helpful, and I’m here because I need to do better — and it’s free,” she said.

The Telemundo health fair is the largest of many community events Cedars-Sinai participates in throughout the year to bring free health services to underserved residents across Los Angeles.

Cedars-Sinai Team at Health Fair Boosts Breast Cancer Screening Among Latinas

Among the expanded services Cedars-Sinai provided at the 10th Annual Health and Wellness Fair presented by Telemundo 52-KVEA and The California Endowment were clinical breast cancer screenings offered by the Wasserman Breast Cancer Risk Reduction Program, part of the Samuel Oschin Comprehensive Cancer Institute.

In four private rooms, breast surgeons and nurses performed clinical exams, taught women to do self-exams and provided referrals for free or low-cost follow-up care as needed. The team also handed out vouchers for free mammograms available just steps away at the Watts Health Mammography Foundation’s van.

Nurse practitioner Sylvia Estrada, DNP, clinical program coordinator for the Wasserman Breast Cancer Risk Reduction Program, was in charge of the area where women lined up for breast exams and could complete a questionnaire to learn about their breast cancer risk. She said a number of the women had never had a clinical breast exam or mammogram: “A high percentage of Latina women are not getting mammograms because they are uninsured and don’t know where to go — and because they’re so busy taking care of others in the family that they don’t take care of themselves.”

In a survey Cedars-Sinai student volunteers handed out at the health fair, nearly 300 women over 40 said they would like to receive a text message on their birthday reminding them to get a mammogram. Estrada said a follow-up study is being planned to determine whether text messaging is an effective way to improve the rate of mammogram screening in this population.

Estrada has been part of the team at the Telemundo fair for the past four years, and she found it especially gratifying to be able to help educate women about breast cancer risk and what a difference early detection can make. “This event is important,” she said. “For many, it’s the only access they have to healthcare.”

The Cedars-Sinai team at the health fair helped educate women about breast cancer risks and early detection.
Healthy Habits Are Catching On

Students brought a competitive spirit to Arlington Heights Elementary School’s first jog-a-thon — shouting out the number of laps they’d completed as they reached the finish line. Meanwhile, on the playground at Marvin Avenue Elementary School a couple of miles away, children ate yogurt parfaits during a nutrition fair that included activities such as soccer and rock climbing.

Cedars-Sinai’s Healthy Habits program provides workshops on nutrition and fitness at these and many other schools in low-income Mid City neighborhoods, but teachers took the lead in organizing these end-of-year, schoolwide events.

Arlington Heights Principal Zoe Jefferson cheered for the students during the jog-a-thon and gave them high fives at the finish line. She was particularly impressed by a heavyset second-grader who often keeps to himself on the playground with a hood pulled over his head. “He’s really engaged today,” she said as he ran by, smiling with his head held high.

At Marvin Avenue Elementary School’s nutrition fair, one of many activities was a chance to huddle around Healthy Habits educator Chad Monk, who captured the students’ attention instantly by holding up a bright yellow blob of gelatinous “body fat” as he discussed the health dangers of fatty foods.

Carolyn Buenaflor, MPH, associate director of Healthy Habits, sees these schoolwide events as a strong sign that the program is paying off. “Our goal is to inspire schools to do more to encourage healthy habits. It’s exciting to see this happening,” she said.

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