



Running a women's free clinic as a medical student: A resident's reflection

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“We’re gonna do the best we can until we can’t”. This quote by Willie D. Wimberly was the mantra of the residential community in Atlanta, Georgia that housed a free clinic I worked in during medical school. And it summed this community of people up perfectly. They welcomed the homeless population of Atlanta in for meals and showers daily. They tirelessly protested against the social injustices in our backyard. They took the relatives of people in prison to visit their loved ones when they lacked transportation to make the 180 mile trip. They humored the idea of two medical students when they asked to start a free clinic dedicated to women’s health about seven years ago. They never stopped, and I didn’t think they ever would.

Then a few days ago I received an email that this 35-year-old residential community where we had operated our one-room free clinic for seven years was gone. Fortunately, some online research revealed that they were just gone from Atlanta and had moved to Maryland. I’m relieved that this residential community still exists, and I’m grateful that our free clinic has relocated to a nearby part of Georgia and is still able to serve patients. However, I feel that the Atlanta community and my former medical school lost something invaluable. This residential community had long been a liaison between Atlanta’s most economically, medically, and socially vulnerable populations, and arguably its most influential.

I spent a year running a free clinic as a first-year medical student and continued to be active in the clinic through the end of medical school. I still think about this clinic, its patients, its staff, and the people who welcomed our clinic into their home. Getting to know this community was one of the most formative experiences I have had in medicine. It reminded me why I chose medicine when I became frustrated with seemingly endless studying. It gave me perspective about the hardships people living in poverty face daily when I was nervous about exams and clerkship evaluations. It allowed me to be a part of a new and student-cultivated project that evolved into a sustainable part of the Atlanta community. Most importantly for me, it cemented my interest in a career dedicated to medical education and caring for the underserved.

In a few years, medical students in Atlanta won’t know about the Open Door Community and its welcoming, dynamic, and socially-conscious residents, a group that was critical in founding not one but two of Emory University’s free student-run clinics. Without a doubt, these clinics would not have succeeded without them. I think it’s important for the tremendous work and support of this organization to be recognized not only for what they have done for medical students and for our patients, but for what they have given the Atlanta community. I am sure many student-run clinics have a similar supporting organization. I hope that each clinic appreciates how critical these unions are to ensuring the health of our neighborhoods, and I hope those that don’t have such a partnership consider reaching out to find ones. I am really grateful for the opportunity my school, Open Door, and my city gave me to start a career of service early in my medical training, and I am excited to see what we all will accomplish for our communities as we continue to “do the best we can until we can’t”.