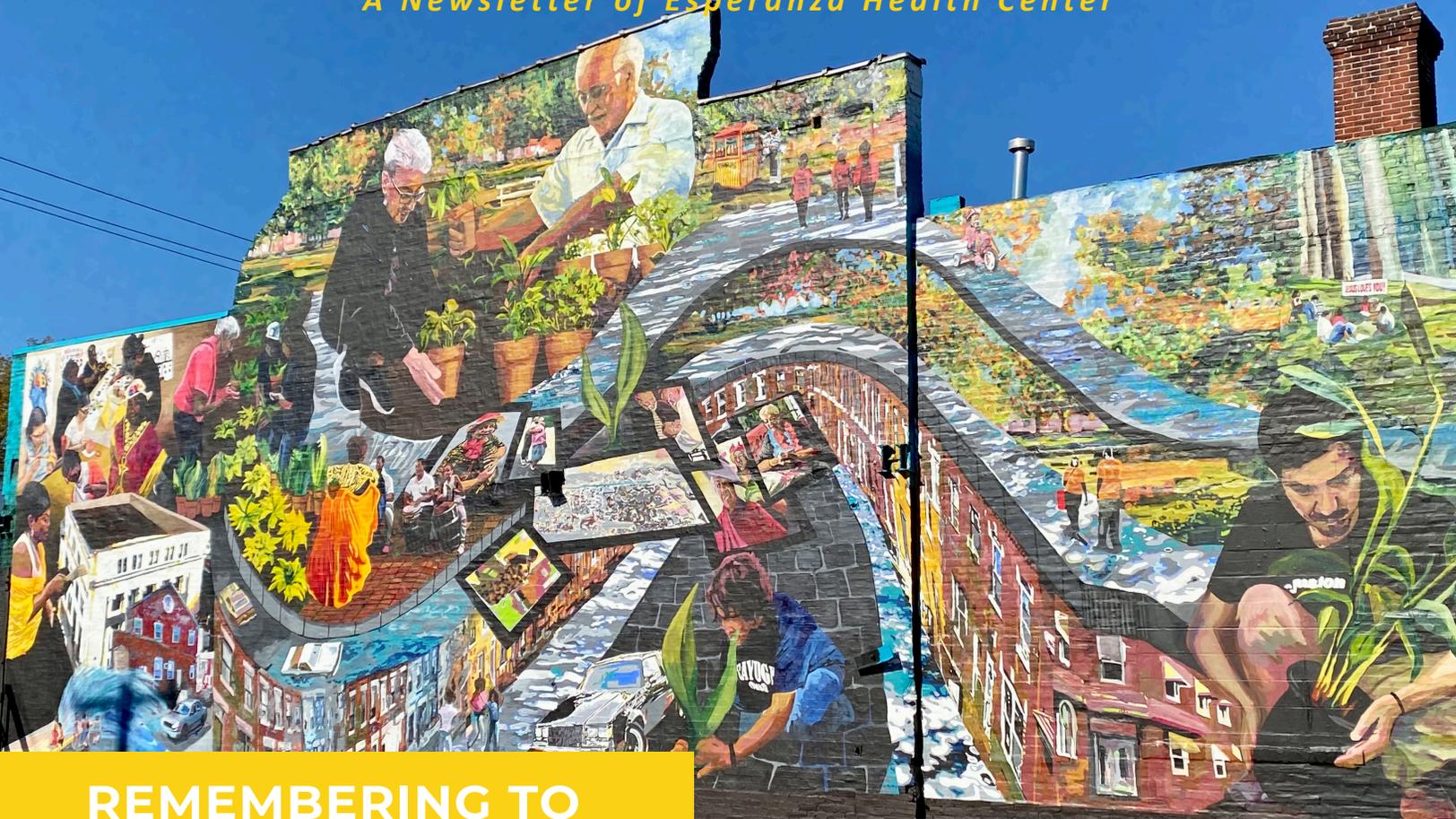


# MESSAGE OF HOPE

*A Newsletter of Esperanza Health Center*



## REMEMBERING TO LOOK FORWARD

**W**ith the opening of our new community wellness center, The CORE, approaching, we are reflecting on how far God has taken Esperanza Health Center — from its early days as a small, second-story walk-up clinic, to a now multi-site health center serving thousands of patients every year! In this edition of the *Message of Hope*, we asked several long-time staff members to reflect on how they've witnessed God's presence during their time at Esperanza. By remembering God's faithfulness to Esperanza all these years, we look forward with hope to what He will continue to do through this new building and beyond!

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**Esperanza  
Health Center**

## HOW HAVE YOU WITNESSED GOD'S FAITHFULNESS AT ESPERANZA?



### CATHY LEON

I remember a day recently when a patient came to our dispensary to pick up their medication to treat their Hepatitis C. New medications that are now available for Hepatitis C can completely heal people from this disease. However, many people with Hepatitis C have come to believe that there is no hope that they will get better and can have an excellent quality of life. Oftentimes, our patients won't start the medications that their provider has prescribed for them, or they don't regularly take their medications, and their health doesn't improve. I congratulated the patient on their decision to pick up the medications and I expressed how proud we were of the patient. They paused for a moment. With tears in their eyes, the patient asked, "You are proud of me?" I replied, "Yes. Because of these brave next steps, you will be healed." A few months later we received the report that the patient no longer had Hepatitis C. I was able to witness God's faithfulness in this situation, in that even in those moments when we think we are alone, we actually are not—God is always present.



### LAURA LAYER, MD

In the early days of Esperanza's ministry, there were a number of times when the health center very nearly closed due to lack of funds. One of these times was in the late 1990s when we faced a significant deficit, and our Board was considering whether to close Esperanza. During a staff meeting, two of my former colleagues, Gloria Vazquez and Dr. Melissa Nieves stood up and basically said: the staff can help with fundraising, let us help you fundraise and we can do this. I specifically remember Gloria saying, "This neighborhood needs us, we cannot close...it isn't God's will that we close!" We then raised enough funds to erase a deficit of about \$250,000 over three months. Around that time, our \$8,000 health insurance coverage bill was due. I knew that it was due, but not the amount. So, I asked about a dozen people I knew if they could help: one person made a gift of \$5,000, two physicians gave \$1,000 each, and we came up with the exact amount. I specifically remember how our clerical assistant did a little dance when she opened the mail and saw these checks arrive!

My greatest hope for Esperanza is a renewed sense of mission, with regard to bringing Jesus to bear. We start the day before we see our patients with prayer, including for specific patients...but I'd love to see a lot more of an impetus towards bringing biblical principles into our care. I want to see us talk more about Jesus and point people to Jesus—and I'm saying this to myself, too! If he is our only hope in the past, he is also our only hope in the future.

## WHAT NEW MERCIES HAVE YOU WITNESSED AT ESPERANZA?



### TIM LEAMAN, MD

When I think back over the 20 years I've served as a doctor at Esperanza, I'm reminded of a patient who presented to his initial visit at EHC with nearly 20 years of debilitating abdominal pain. This pain had started following complications after a medical procedure in another state. The effects of the pain were so great, they resulted in the patient losing his job, later contributed to the dissolving of his marriage, and eventually led to the patient disconnecting from the church where he had previously been active in ministry. During his visit, he recounted a recurring thought he had: to find and kill the surgeon involved in the failed medical procedure.

As we listened and set up some tests and procedures, I also ventured to ask whether the patient had ever considered what impact harboring this ongoing bitterness might be having at present on his health. He was open to thinking about this, and welcomed our invitation to pray for him in this journey. On returning a few weeks later, that patient passed me on his way to the exam room. With a big grin, he announced, "I did it." As I sat down in the room, he explained. "I forgave the surgeon. And my stomach pain is gone. I've gone back to church. Everything has changed." In the years of care for the patient afterward, the abdominal pain he previously suffered from never returned, and we witnessed the patient's journey to restored relationships both with God and with his family.

## HOW HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THE LORD'S STEADFAST LOVE AT ESPERANZA?



### MISSY GUDZ, RN

I started my journey at Esperanza Health Center in 1995, serving Jesus as a staff nurse when we operated in a small, second story walk up clinic, and returned to Esperanza in January 2022, again as a nurse in our Care Management Department. Since then, I have witnessed God's steadfast love shown in the care of our patients, our staff, and the community as a whole in a myriad of ways.

I have witnessed a patient who upon first introduction to Esperanza was riddled with anger, hurt and rejection, creating the lenses through which he viewed many events of his day-to-day life. This resulted in great conflict and difficulty in his relationships. He is now a changed man who is experiencing peace and improved health. Through the consistent, compassionate care shown by his physician, Dr. Rita Ramos, and other staff members, he has adopted new health habits, and has experienced a new sense of love and grace that has been cultivated by God. He is taking measures to be engaged with his health goals and steps to grow in his relationship with Jesus. As a piece of clay in the Potter's hands—he is a new creation in Christ.

The same love demonstrated in this patient's life I have also seen shown to our staff recently, as some of us have faced health crises, family fractures and deaths of precious friends and family members. When our community has suffered and hurt, we have grieved, prayed and sought ways to be light and love for our surrounding precious ones who live in North Philadelphia. We have prayed and worked alongside others in our community to care for the homeless, ones seeking and using drugs, and who are affected by the violence that is ravaging our streets. Hope is desperately needed in our current day and time as we face many obstacles in North Philadelphia—and that hope can only be found in God's great love, grace and mercy through redemption in Jesus Christ.



### SASHA RIVERA

God's steadfast love is unwavering and never changes. In the past six years working at Esperanza, I have experienced God's steadfast love over and over again. As I start each work day, I have a consistent prayer: "let us be a reflection of you in our interactions with our community and let us see you in them as well." Each day, God answers that prayer, even when I don't always immediately notice it.

I have had the privilege of being able to sit and speak with patients who have shared their stories of the work that God is doing in their lives. Their stories open my eyes to just how deeply God cares for them. Working at our Kensington site, I have seen how when we are closed for the weekend, our building is still a refuge to the community outside. I have also witnessed the small ways in which God has shown his steadfast love to me throughout the day: whether it be an encouraging note from a patient, a chocolate left on my desk by a coworker on a particularly rough day, a perfectly-timed hug, or interesting conversations with community members on the way to the parking lot. God's love for us is so deep that He pays attention to even the smallest details. If there is anything that working at Esperanza has taught me, it's that there is nothing you can do to make God love you less; there is nothing you can do to make God love you more. His love is promised, always true, and available to everyone.

## JOANNA'S STORY

*One of our patients, Joanna\*, who is currently in our medication-assisted treatment (MAT) program for individuals with opioid-use disorder, is giving thanks for Esperanza's clinicians and staff and how they've come alongside her throughout her journey to recovery:*

"When I first came to Esperanza, my physician Dr. [Daria] Chacón shared with me that Esperanza's name means 'hope.' I started to cry because Hope is the name of one of my daughters. Coming to Esperanza, and developing a relationship with Dr. Chacón, and with [Esperanza nurse practitioner] Sam Baker-Evens has made such a difference. I do pray, and they pray with me. They never gave up on me, never—no matter how far down I was, they were always there for me. Never once was I judged.

Not that long ago, I was in the hospital for 29 days. Yet, all that time I felt as though God was there with me. Then, after I was out of the hospital, I went back to Esperanza—it was like the most welcoming party! There was so much support for me. I see the behavioral health staff once a week, which has helped me tremendously, including different techniques such as breathing exercises. They know a lot about me, my history and my story, but never once did they turn my back on me!"

Joanna believes that God has been with her as she has partnered with the Esperanza team in her recovery: "God is the one who sat me down, to just breathe again—to get to a positive point, and to keep praying. That's what I've done over the past 11 months. It's not always been easy, but I'm depending on God."

*\* Name changed to protect the patient's identity.*

## TRANSFORMING WITH INTENTION

### A MURAL FOR HUNTING PARK

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, Esperanza Health Center staff, friends, family, and many community stakeholders gathered at Esperanza's Hunting Park site to dedicate a new mural, "Transforming with Intention" (photo, R), designed by artist Betsy Casañas. Many community partners collaborated to make the new mural a reality, including: Esperanza Health Center; ARTZ Philadelphia; ARTZ in the Neighborhood's Hunting Park community advisors; Mural Arts Philadelphia; Vocatio Career Prep High School; Aramingo Day Center; and, churches and organizations in Hunting Park.



A central goal of the mural project was to represent the resilience, creativity, and contributions of Hunting Park community members who are living with memory loss and those who love them. Another goal was to honor the late Pastor Manny Ortiz and his wife, Blanca, (cover photo, top center of mural) and their legacy that has inspired continuing generations to plant and sow seeds of change in Hunting Park. Through community meetings with artist Betsy Casañas to plan the mural, the theme of seed-sowing was developed.

The vivid mural depicts several longtime community members as they sow and plant the seeds of creativity, inspiration, and faith, continuing the legacy of Pastor Manny and Blanca. Members of ARTZ in the Neighborhood's community advisory group—some of whom knew and loved Pastor Manny—are also shown in the mural as his successors in sowing seeds of compassion, respect and honor for those living with memory loss, thus enabling them to live lives with meaning and joy.

Inspired in part by 1 Corinthians 3:6-9 and its references to planting and growth, the mural serves as a visual reminder that the work of sowing and planting seeds requires many hands, but that growth and transformation ultimately belongs to God. Said Debra Ortiz-Vasquez, EHC's Director of Community Health and Wellness and daughter of Pastor Manny and Blanca Ortiz, "That's our calling...intentionally sowing into others, seeing potential in someone when they can't see it [in themselves], seeing what the human eye can't see. My hope is that the mural will be a constant reminder of this." ARTZ Philadelphia's Community Engagement Manager, Cleo Smalls, added: "I am grateful I had the opportunity to be a part of this mural project, to see the emotions, memories, and voices of the Hunting Park community transform into a joyous work of art."

The mural resides on the side of the Joy in the City building in the parking lot of our Hunting Park site (4417 N. 6<sup>th</sup> Street). We invite you to come and see this beautiful representation of our rich and beloved community!

### JOIN US IN OUR MISSION!

There are many ways you can be involved in Esperanza Health Center's mission to provide high-quality, comprehensive health care services, in Jesus' name, to the Latino and underserved communities of Philadelphia:

**GIVE:** Visit [esperanzahealth.com/donate](https://esperanzahealth.com/donate) to make a secure, online gift.

**SERVE:** We're seeking qualified professionals who share in our Christ-centered mission to join our team. To view a list of current openings and to apply, visit [esperanzahealth.com/careers](https://esperanzahealth.com/careers). Interested in volunteering? Learn more about our available volunteer opportunities, at [esperanzahealth.com/join-us/volunteering](https://esperanzahealth.com/join-us/volunteering).

**PRAY:** Thank you for your prayers for us as we seek to fulfill our mission.