

# Standing in the Gap

*Disciples Clinic provides 'medical home' to qualifying county residents without health insurance*

**Story and photos by Toni Garrard Clay**

Few people know better than Gary Williamson that something good can come out of something bad. Less than 10 years ago, Williamson became ill to the point of requiring dialysis in a battle against renal failure. Himself a doctor with years of experience in emergency medicine, he knew how dire the situation was.

Then in 2006 Williamson underwent a successful kidney transplant, effectively giving him a second chance at life.

"I really prayed a lot about what the Lord intended for me to do when I was healthy again," said Williamson.

He had seen firsthand the need for the working uninsured to have access to preventative care through a "medical home," rather than being forced to use the ER as a last resort for crisis intervention.

"It really ate at me that it's like that," he said. "I knew many of their problems were preventable and treatable if they had access to affordable, clinic-type care, and I felt it was my calling to get it done."

Williamson started by teaming up with Layton Holt and Clay Estes at First Christian Church of Athens. In January 2010, through the efforts and gifts of a great many people and the donation of a building by Primera Iglesia Bautista of Athens, Disciples Clinic opened its doors. Today, with an almost exclusively volunteer staff, it serves as a medical home for some 800 Henderson County residents.



Dr. Paul Michiels and Katy Dooley, RN, meet with a patient. Dr. Michiels was recently named "Volunteer Provider of the Quarter," and Dooley began volunteering at the clinic before it ever opened to patients. The clinic is always seeking volunteer providers and support staff.

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"To my knowledge, it has become the largest, most successful faith-based, non-denominational, charitable effort in Henderson County," said Williamson, who serves as the clinic's chief medical officer. "That's something to be proud of. I can't say enough in praise of the professionals who give their time and expertise to the effort."

The requirements for qualifying as a patient at the clinic include five basic rules: the patient must live in Henderson County; the patient or a member of the patient's family must work at least 20 hours per week;

the patient's total household income is less than twice the poverty level (for two people, that's about \$29,600 annually); the patient must be 19 to 64 years of age (otherwise government assistance is available); and the patient must not have any form of health insurance.

Treatment at the clinic is not free, though it is very affordable.

"This is a full-blown, state-of-the-art clinic run by professional people who

are devoted," said Williamson. "We abide by the same standard of care as everyone else, and we're able to provide amazing services."

Dr. Stephen Walling, who volunteers at Disciples Clinic every Thursday, said it's a pleasure to practice there, in part because it's the way he envisions medicine as having been practiced many years ago.

"The entire focus is between me and my patient and what I can do for my patient," he wrote in a clinic newsletter. "The government is not involved in my decision-



The Disciples Clinic is run almost exclusively through volunteers and relies on tax-deductible donations and grants to fund two-thirds of its operating expenses. Included among the clinic staff are (top row, from left) Renate Greve; Julie Smith; Assistant Office Manager Diana Allen; Elena McCord; Katy Dooley, RN; Antonio Torres; (bottom row, from left) Chief Administrative Officer Layton Holt; Sandy Curran, RN; Office Manager (and wife to Dr. Williamson) Anne Williamson; and Chief Medical Officer Gary Williamson, MD

making... I can just think about doing what they need to have done, and it's a pleasure to be able to be so unencumbered."

The clinic, located at 604 York Street in Athens, is open Tuesday, Thursday and half a day Saturday. Services include laboratory, x-ray, mammography, dietary, pharmaceutical, psychological, ophthalmologic and dental. In fact, longtime Athens dentist Joe Mike Murphy, a Disciples Clinic "Founder's Group" member, arranged to equip it with two complete dental stations.

Disciples Clinic has cultivated relationships with two pharmacies in Athens, Anderson Drug and Gibson Discount Pharmacy, as well as with organizations such as Texas LabCorp and Ross Breast Center.

"Our limiting factor is volunteer services," explained Williamson. "At some point we hope to be open another day a week, and we may need to hire a medical director who's here all the time."

At present there are around 25 to 30 active volunteers, with about seven who are there on a weekly basis.

"There's a steep learning curve to working in a medical environment and you really have to learn and use some important skills," explained Williamson. "People who are serious about wanting to do it really do love it. We need more people who are willing to learn and love it."

Financial contributions are also needed and greatly appreciated. Patient contributions amount to about one-third of the cost of running the clinic. The rest comes through tax-deductible donations from individuals, companies, organizations and grants.

"I believe the Disciples Clinic is a prime example of what the wonderful people of faith in our community can and will do for the right cause," said Williamson. "Every day we're open is a testimony to that."

For more information or to give: [www.disciplesclinic.org](http://www.disciplesclinic.org), 903-677-3604, PO Box 1757, Athens, TX 75751 