

## Church, clinic team up to provide health care in colonia

By Mel Huff  
The Brownsville Herald

BROWNSVILLE, Sept. 7, 2004 – In the late 1990s, Sister Maria Ceballos, a Dominican nun who worked as a nurse practitioner at the Brownsville Community Health Center, got the idea of holding weekend women’s clinics at a Cameron Park church.



BRAD DOHERTY/The Brownsville Herald

She teamed up with a medical student doing a clerkship at BCHC, and he organized some classmates to help with screenings at San Felipe de Jesus.

Ceballos is now in Honduras, but the seed of those efforts to provide health care to the colonia’s residents has now born fruit.

Monday afternoon, a ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held for a 4,000-square-foot clinic on Delia Street in Cameron Park. The clinic is a joint project of BCHC and Frontera de Salud, which has grown into a statewide organization of medical students.

On Monday evening, a dedication ceremony will be held for an extension of the sanctuary of San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Church, the original site of Ceballos’ weekend clinics.

The missions of church, students and clinic have intertwined to bring health care to a community that often finds medical access difficult.

But according to the Rev. Mike Seifert, the priest of San Felipe de Jesus, the collaborations reflect that “there is no (health care) system for poor people. The system is scraps of papers shared among social workers.”

The health care mission of San Felipe de Jesus began soon after the parish was organized. The hopes and aspirations of the community centered on meeting basic needs, Seifert said.

“Right off the top amongst any family without health insurance was an extraordinary anguish about medical care,” he noted.

So the parish sought funding from the Daughters of Charity, a Catholic foundation, Brother Albert Phillippp renovated a building, and San Felipe began a parish nurse program. Ceballos became the second parish nurse.

In 1998, Dr. Kirk Smith, then a student at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, came to BCHC to do a clinical clerkship. He met Ceballos and Seifert and was inspired.

He told two classmates, Fausto Meza and Adam Flynn, about what he had seen in Cameron Park and “they took fire,” he says.

The three started an organization of UTMB students who volunteered one weekend a month in Brownsville: On Saturdays they did pap smears and breast exams at BCHC, and on Sundays they held screenings at San Felipe de Jesus after Mass. They named the student organization Frontera de Salud.

Frontera de Salud has now grown into a statewide organization of medical students. Frontera forms partnerships with existing health centers to extend health care services in communities of need. It has also developed an elective program for primary care residents nationwide.

“We were hobbling along at San Felipe de Jesus using the makeshift clinic in the back and Kirk decided he was

going to write a grant to build a (small) clinic,” said Paula Gomez, BCHC’s executive director. Then, fortuitously, Dr. Jorge Dominguez, a Brownsville pediatrician, offered to donate his Delia Street clinic to BCHC.

The new clinic has four examination rooms, a conference room, a vaccination station and space for laboratory and radiological services.

“The beauty of it is that we’re going to have a family practice doc, Dr. Humberto de la Vega, who will be able to provide family care,” says Paula Gomez, BCHC’s executive director. “It will become a clinic for the entire family, not just kids or not just women, and we’ll be able to impact families positively with prevention, as well as primary care.”

In addition to de la Vega, the Cameron Park clinic will be staffed by Frontera de Salud medical students and residents. Smith, now executive director of Frontera and an assistant professor of family medicine at UTMB, will administer the program.

Staff positions, medical equipment, social assistance and pharmaceuticals are being provided through grants written collaboratively by Frontera and San Felipe de Jesus.

The mission of Frontera de Salud is not religious, Smith says, although he notes that “health care professionals go into their training partly motivated by a service ideal.”

But, he asks, given the way medical education and practice are organized today, “When do you have an opportunity to put that service ideal into action?”

“There are many people in the health profession field who end up in their careers disappointed and feeling a certain absence because the idealism that carried them into the profession they don’t get to experience in their practice,” he says, adding that Frontera de Salud gives participants an opportunity to put that service ideal into action.

Frontera’s organizers want participants to become aware of the barriers that the poor and uninsured face in trying to access health care. And they want to arm them with the knowledge and skills they need to advocate effectively for access.

“Currently the program is developing electives, tutorials, classes and practica to give participants those skills,” he says.

He maintains that doctors need to understand health care policy and how it affects access, financing and utilization. They need to understand the bureaucratic and legislative processes and know whom to call.

They will develop the awareness and skills needed to be effective advocates through their experience in Cameron Park, he says.

“We’re not providing service to the community,” Smith says. “We’re providing service in the community.”

## **Monday Dedications**

### *What and When:*

BCHC at Cameron Park, 2609 Avda. Delia:

Open house and health fair, 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Ribbon cutting: 4:30 p.m.

Tour, refreshments and music to follow

Tel: 546-4243

Hours: Mon. and Thurs. 1-5 p.m. initially

San Felipe de Jesus, 2026 Avda Rancho Viejo: Dedication at 7 p.m.

Tel: 982-2207