

## Health care students bring hope to Cameron Park

**Program: Frontera de Salud provides services to medically underserved.**

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October 3, 2004 — One weekend a month about a dozen students from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston hop on a bus and make the seven-hour trip to Brownsville.



LIZA LONGORIA/The Brownsville Herald

They sleep during the nearly 400-mile journey for what they know will be a busy weekend as they provide medical care for an underserved area.

The group visits the Brownsville Community Health Center on East 22nd Street where they perform medical exams on the center's patients.

They conduct cervix and breast examinations on patients who have been on waiting lists for months.

Brownsville resident Yolanda C. Ruiz, 57, had no problem with the health care students conducting her exams on Sept. 25. Had she not received care on that date, she would have had to wait until January 2005, when an opening at the center was available.

"They need to learn, too," Ruiz said. "They ask me questions about my health, my headaches and any other discomforts I have. They were very concerned."

The health care students are participating in the Frontera de Salud, a volunteer program at the UTMB-Galveston. The program allows its students to experience the needs of the medically underserved first-hand.

As she finishes examining Ruiz, second-year medical student Tammy Howard reminds the Brownsville woman to have her doctor exam her legs.

Ruiz had undergone knee replacement surgery and was starting to experience some swelling and pain.

"It seemed like they are more concerned," Ruiz said minutes after her evaluation. "The doctors, sometimes they walk in and it's one, two, three and they are out. They (the students) take more time."

This is the sixth year students from UTMB-Galveston visit Brownsville. Part of the program requires that they visit an underserved area once a month to help provide medical care for those in the area.

Providing health care for the underserved people of Brownsville is virtually an eye opener for many of the students, said Dr. Kirk L. Smith, director of the Frontera de Salud program at the UTMB-Galveston.

During his first trip to Brownsville, Smith said he was amazed by who was showing up at BCHC for medical care.

"It's not illegal aliens, it's not the very, very poor. It's the working people," Smith said.

The students learn that many of those showing up to BCHC are the working class who cannot afford medical insurance. Yet, they earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid or Medicare.

Rachel C. Locker, 29, is a first-year physician assistant at UTMB-Galveston. This is the first time she has helped at BCHC.

Locker read about the all-volunteer program on a flier posted at the university and wanted to have hands-on experience early in her medical career.

Locker said she wasn't too worried about the language barrier. There was always a bilingual student or physician nearby to help with the Spanish and English translation.

"I hope to gain confidence" by helping here, Locker said.

Fourth-year medical student Ryan Gregory helps lead a team of students. He guides them through the exams, telling them what to look for. He also evaluates their performance. Gregory had visited the health center during his second-year stint as a medical student.

At a Sept. 26 health fair at Casa Digna in Cameron Park, Gregory met a woman with a severe thyroid problem. Enedina Zamarippa's thyroid gland had been growing for the past two years. She had received no medical care.

After examining Zamarippa, Gregory contacted Dr. Smith, who evaluated the 54-year-old woman.

Smith said Zamarippa is the perfect example of why the health care profession students are needed in the area.

"When it (the thyroid) gets this big it closes off the wind pipe, and she will have trouble at night sleeping. ... This is life threatening.

"If she hadn't come in here, what would have happened?"

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