



Life...Captured Every Day

Students provide free health care

By MEL HUFF
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BROWNSVILLE, Sept. 28, 2003 — Twenty young men and women in lab coats crowded into a small conference room at the Brownsville Community Health Center early Saturday morning.

They had arrived at 1:30 a.m. from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston and the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

They are members of Frontera de Salud, a student organization that provided gynecological checkups on Saturday to patients at BCHC, and made home visits and provided screenings for residents of Cameron Park.

The students will work through noon today and return to their schools this afternoon.

The arrangement carries mutual benefits. For the patients, it means a chance to get a checkup right away. BCHC has such a backlog that without the medical students' help, the earliest they could get appointments would be May 2004.

For the students, the visit allows them to learn how medicine is practiced in the real world.

Three students from UTHSCSA crowded into an examining room with a patient and Sally Peñafiel, a physician's assistant.

"I've never done this," says Kelly Tijerina, a second-year medical student.

Peñafiel, who has worked with students during her entire 24 years of practice, shows the students how to do a breast exam.

"Every year I get nervous," the patient tells them.

After the breast exam, Peñafiel helps the patient scoot down the table.

This was Tijerina's first experience touching a patient.

"As a learning experience, it's amazing to me," she declares.

"It kind of makes you feel guilty because you feel like you're gaining so much more than they are.

"The whole point of being here is to contribute whatever skill we do have, but in the process you end up being the one to receive," she says.