



# Respect, Dignity, and Making a Home

By Joseph Castillo

**H**ome is one of the most powerful words in the English language. A house is not a home, home is where the heart is, there's no place like home. Home is where you rest, it is the people you trust, it is where you feel safe and find a sense of true belonging. To call something home is to label it family and a safeguard all at once. To many Houstonians, the San José Clinic is a place so meaningful that only one word can encapsulate its importance: home.

Created in 1922, the San José Clinic (first called la Clínica Gratuita, then the Mexican Clinic) was established to help the children of Houston's Second Ward, also known as Segundo Barrio and El Alacrán, at the time, but more often called the East End today. Many of these children lived in homes with no running water, no paved roads, and with families who owned little besides the clothes on their backs. The community was composed largely of refugees – individuals and families displaced by the Mexican Revolution who were lucky to escape with anything and had traveled hundreds of miles for a little of the succor that the United States could provide in their time of need.<sup>2</sup>

What they received paled in comparison to what they expected to find, as often happens when people leave their

*"There was this very spiritual quality about the clinic that I kind of fell in love with it. It felt like home to me."*<sup>1</sup>

— Diana "Didi" Garza,  
San José Clinic volunteer

priority or flat out refused to help and chalked it up to a difference of opinion or cultural mistranslations.<sup>3</sup>

So when a new clinic opened with its mission to help them specifically, the Mexican population noticed. Children and adults were finally able to see doctors who offered quality care and treatments when they were sick, helping reduce mortality rates in the Mexican community. Clinic services grew to include optometry, dentistry, pharmaceuticals, nutrition, counseling, and more. Even in recent years serving the uninsured, fees remain affordable, based on a sliding scale, and no one is turned away for inability to pay.<sup>4</sup> Although founded to address needs in the Mexican community, the clinic served anyone unable to afford care and improved the livelihoods of thousands of people who would never forget it.

*[The San José Clinic is] often referred to as a safety net clinic ... [T]here are a lot of nets out there but not all of them are very tightly woven. But when somebody lands in the San José Clinic, it's a tightly woven safety net clinic that catches them and takes care of them and doesn't let them slip any farther.*

— Les Cave, CEO Northwest Assistance Ministries

Pins added to the map above indicate the early clinic locations in Second Ward. Pin 1: 1900 Franklin (1922-1925); pin 2: 1909 Canal (1925-1954); pin 3: 1919 Runnels (1954-1956); and pin 4: 301 Hamilton (1956-2010).

Map from Alacrán essay courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0352.044.



*Joe Goeters, grandson of clinic cofounder Katherine Carroll, recalled essentially growing up at the clinic on Canal, going there with his grandmother and his mother, Florence, who operated C & G Paper House in a warehouse next door. The clinic's community spirit made a life-long impression on him and his siblings who all spent time in education and service to the church.*

Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

Oral histories collected to document San José's centennial reveal the biggest reason the diverse Latino community goes there is not the availability of care or even the price. It is because everyone who works or volunteers there puts everything they have into the care they give their patients. It does not matter what ethnicity you are, your income, or even your religion. The staff at the clinic treats everyone the same – as someone who matters. And how could they not? The clinic seeks to provide quality healthcare and education to people who have limited access to those services in an environment that respects each person's dignity.<sup>5</sup>

*Dignity /'dignədē/ noun: the quality or state of being worthy of honor, or respect.*

Houstonians live in a country where anti-immigrant sentiment has run unchecked in recent years, and in a city where 20 percent of the population lives in poverty, and



*The San José Clinic offered vaccinations for children, which helped to improve overall health and reduce the mortality rates in the community. Former patients like Irma Galvan still remember and appreciate the care they received.*

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

almost one in five people are uninsured – the highest rate among large U.S. cities. Here, to be treated with respect is intoxicating. Stacie Cokinos, CEO of the clinic from 2001 to 2011 explained, "There's something that's so pure and sincere about the mission and how it hasn't changed ... [T]he impact that it has on people's lives is just pivotal." To be told, "You matter," and then be treated like you do is incredibly rare. Yet the clinic stands firm in its principles.<sup>6</sup>

*"Even though our patients were only paying ten dollars or twenty dollars to get in, it didn't matter... We treated our patients as if they had the best insurance plan and were paying \$1,000 to be seen every day. Because that's what they deserve. ... That human dignity aspect was the watermark on everything that we did."*

— Paule Anne Lewis, San José Clinic CEO, 2011-2018

Respecting a patient's dignity can take many forms. It is remembering that the patients are people. It is remembering to say, "Mr. Jones is coming in," [because] he is not a knee patient, he is Mr. Jones," physical therapist Dr. Beverly Newman explained.<sup>7</sup> It is opening the clinic on a day it was normally closed to treat one little girl.<sup>8</sup> It is assisting a man, who was just attacked and covered in blood, by calmly and kindly getting help.<sup>9</sup> It is fighting for funding every day and refusing to raise the price for care.

This watermark, this respect for every person, flows in tandem with the beliefs and actions of the clinic staff. As clinic board member and assistant professor of nursing Michael Sullivan, Ph.D., pointed out, "You don't go to the San José Clinic for a job because you can get a job anywhere. You go to the San José Clinic to serve." And serve they do. The staff members are united in their battle to provide care to as many people as possible. As medical director Dr. Diana Grair, noted, "Everybody, of course, needs a job, needs an income, but you have different priorities." In fact, nearly all of the medical providers are there pro bono, for free. Nobody on staff is there simply going through the motions, which Dr. Newman confirmed in saying the "people who work there want to be there. They want to help people."<sup>10</sup>

Through high times and low, the clinic does its best to help. Practitioners volunteer for decades, such as Dr. Warren Bellows, Dr. James Lloyd, Dr. Mary Neal, Dr. Lloyd Pate, Dr. Susan Pokorny-Egolf, Dr. George Quirk, and Michael Sullivan, Ph.D. Kimberlyn Clarkson, chief advancement officer of the San José Clinic, pointed out these people donate their time because they care about other people: "[The] volunteer providers, along with [the clinic's] staff, get to know a whole person. They know a family, and they make certain that they always reinforce that they are committed to that person and that family."<sup>11</sup>

The clinic provides much-needed levity through events such as Christmas parties that patients remember for decades, and over time the staff and volunteers have become beloved community members. When a disaster occurs, the clinic

shines like a beacon in dark times. In 2017 with the devastation from Hurricane Harvey, the San José Clinic opened its doors as soon as possible to help keep Houston afloat. From running pop-up clinics and providing shelters with medications and supplies to expediting the process of allowing out-of-state doctors to serve, the clinic did everything in its power to help. This was despite Harvey hitting the staff just as hard as everyone else. According to the CEO at the time, Paule Anne Lewis, "We had staff members that had lost everything ... [But] they came to work every day to see patients and to help patients and do their job."<sup>12</sup>

This awe-worthy dedication is not done in vain. The patients remember and they come back to the clinic because "they always took care of us ... [and] everybody in the neighborhood," recalled Irma Galvan, award-winning chef, and owner of Irma's Original restaurant. "When I was a little girl, I remember the clinic, my brothers and sisters, the neighbors, we all got together and went for our shots." To the community, the San José Clinic was more than just a clinic. It was a landmark, something that helped define the area alongside other powerhouses like Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and School. The clinic was something Second Ward natives such as Elias Cortina, now a member of the San José Clinic board of directors, knew would always be there for them.<sup>13</sup>

The 301 Hamilton location, which was the clinic's home from 1956 to 2010, was both special and familiar. People could come in to heal their ills, but just as often it was a part of their home. Dr. Margaret McNeese recounted how "a lot of people came there ... because it was air conditioned [and] warm in the winter. It served as more than a clinic ... it was basically a gathering place for many, many people there." Sometimes, the clinic resembled a street scene, she said, with

vendors. Some were selling food, and others spilled into the big waiting room or porch.<sup>14</sup>

Entering the building was entering home. The sisters



*Award-winning restaurant owner and chef Irma Galvan speaks with University of Houston student Celine Pineda about her memories of the San José Clinic and what it means to Houston's Latino community.*

Photo courtesy of Houston History.

and staff remembered the patients and their families, and the patients and families remembered the staff. It created a safe space, where a person could rest. At times, "it was a lively and caring place to be [where] activity was non-stop," Cortina reminisced. It was a place full of love. "Love really held the bricks together," Stacie Cokinos observed.<sup>15</sup>

For decades, the clinic stood in the heart of the East End, but as times changed it was forced to move with the construction of the downtown ballpark and the need to modernize. The new location makes the clinic more accessible thanks to the nearby rail line, allowing people across Houston to experience the clinic's compassion just as El Segundo Barrio residents have since 1922.

The San José Clinic has been running for a century now, one of the oldest charity clinics in the nation, but it is a charity clinic that has not lost its way in today's world. It has never forsaken its mission or resigned itself to giving lackluster care. His Eminence Daniel Cardinal DiNardo observed that from the beginning, the clinic has expanded its scope to provide "medical care for those whom Pope Francis would frequently call 'on the margins.' ... They like the closeness and the intimacy. They also come to the San José Clinic because they know they will be respected as persons."<sup>16</sup>

To those who get to know the clinic, it is incredible, their work is admirable, and the care is invaluable. The clinic deserves to be celebrated as a place that treats people with dignity and respect – as home. Irma Galvan captured this feeling, "Mi gente [my people] – we help each other. San José, la Guadalupe, the neighborhood, Irma's, Ninfa's, we're all part of El Segundo Barrio, and I feel like we're all part of the San José Clinic. ... We cannot forget la clínica ... [We must] continue with the legend de la clínica because they've always been there for us."<sup>17</sup> □

*Clinic director Sr. Pauline Troncale arrived one day to find the lobby statue of baby Jesus wearing a stocking cap like those hospital nurses put on newborn babies. She felt a mother who had received her prenatal care at the clinic must have put the cap there as a token of gratitude for a successful delivery, reflecting, "We were grateful that we could provide that."*

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.



**Joseph Castillo**, a history student at the University of Houston, was born and raised in the Greater Houston area. As a first-generation American, he has always had his eyes open to issues impacting immigrant families and, on learning about the San José Clinic centennial issue, wanted to be a part of telling its story.