



Celebrating the San José Clinic Centennial and Looking Forward to the Next 100 Years

By Alondra Torres

In a U.S. healthcare system trying to service hundreds of millions of people, many find themselves living without access to proper healthcare. Yet, people in need of medical attention cannot risk falling between the cracks. The San José Clinic, Houston's original safety net clinic, opened its doors in 1922 with a mission of helping the underserved. Since then, the clinic has dedicated itself to addressing key issues for marginalized communities, such as the growing rate of uninsured Texas residents, always molding to the present needs of its patients. During the past 100 years, the clinic has survived economic downturns, natural disasters, and rapid population growth as it adapted to the ever-changing landscape of a developing metropolis, earning a reputation as home to many who seek its services.

As the clinic prepared to celebrate its centennial, students in the Center for Public History at the University of Houston conducted interviews with members of the San José community. In these conversations, former patients, board members, volunteers, staff, funders, and

administrators reflected on the clinic's accomplishments, the people it serves, and their hopes for the future.

Since its founding, the San José Clinic has functioned under a nonprofit model, securing medical tools from local donations, partnering with Catholic charities and businesses, and recruiting volunteers from hospitals, universities, and the medical community. The road to the 100th anniversary has not been easy. The clinic has suffered through drought and abundance alike, particularly with funds. Stacie Cokinos, former clinic executive director and CEO (2001-2011), experienced two economic recessions and the transformative reliance on technology during her tenure. She recalled the economic downturns "increased the need" among Houstonians who lost their health insurance when they lost their jobs. As patient needs increased, so did the clinic's financial need. When faced with this adversity,

The San José Clinic opened its facility at 2615 Fannin in 2010. The state-of-the-art facility accommodated 27,940 patient visits in 2019 and in 2020, during the pandemic, provided 18,662 visits, including drive-through services.

Photo courtesy of Wes Jackson, Ph.D.



Chris Palombo, center, the CEO of Dispensary of Hope, which provides pharmaceuticals to safety-net clinics, and community pharmacy resident, Dr. Randall Flores, right, meet with San José CEO Maureen Sanders in the clinic's pharmacy.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

the clinic did not simply accept the turmoil. The staff instead relied on hard work and their spiritual foundation to bring in additional funds. Cokinos remembers a couple of times when “there was no money in the bank account, and yet, payroll was coming [due] ... [I]t was just a huge act of faith. We would pray payroll in, and a grant would arrive just in time ... it was just pretty miraculous.”¹

The clinic has done more than adapt during times of hardship. It also embraced a new era of technology and used it to improve patient care. Through community work, the clinic has thrived, even opening a new location in Rosenberg in Fort Bend County, southwest of Houston, in 2020.

The San José Clinic has touched many lives and will continue to transform many more in the next 100 years with its generosity and adaptability. As Houston grows exponentially, so will the needs of millions of residents.

The idea for the Fort Bend County location was born out of relief efforts the clinic conducted during Hurricane Harvey. With help from the Scanlan Foundation and Memorial Hermann, the branch clinic opened in August of 2020.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.



The clinic will need to harness the talents that have allowed it to persevere, as well as welcome the changes to come. Looking to the future, staff, volunteers, and patients alike hope that the clinic continues to expand its services and facilities in a variety of ways. For example, Les Cave, former president of the CHRISTUS Foundation and current CEO of the Northwest Assistance Ministries, hopes that the clinic “takes their high-quality, high-compassionate care to more parts of Houston and Harris County and even Fort Bend County ... because the need is growing faster than [the region] can provide the services.”²



Dr. Portia Davis, left, from Texas Southern University's Department of Pharmacy Practice, works with clinic patients and students, such as Charlotte Nguyen from the University of Houston, who are doing their clinical rotations at the San José Clinic. Here Davis demonstrates a variety of insulin devices to students.

Photo courtesy Debbie Harwell.

Dr. Portia Davis – a disease state management clinical pharmacist at the clinic, associate professor in the Department of Pharmacy Practice, and interim executive director of Interprofessional Practice at Texas Southern University – wants the clinic to become “better equipped with the resources that are needed in this ever-expanding healthcare arena.” She especially hopes the clinic expands its partnerships with medical providers that will give San José Clinic patients access to treatment for serious health issues like cancer. Most importantly, Dr. Davis acknowledges that the clinic is not a hospital system; but referring patients to the right medical facilities will help them “continue their care, and once they’re healthy enough, [they can] come back to their medical home [at San José].”³

Similarly, the clinic’s medical director, Dr. Diana Grair, would like to expand clinic specialties such as gastroenterology, pulmonology, orthopedics, and pharmacology – departments that San José Clinic does not have currently. She sees it happening as a next phase for the clinic, when it can be done in “collaboration with the local residency program so that we can serve as a preceptorship [where students are supervised in a clinical setting], so that they can bring their specialty clinic and see our patients.”⁴ Expanding



Dr. Diana Grair and her husband enjoy the 2021 Art with Heart at George Ranch. Dr. Grair joined the clinic as medical director in 2017 and works to expand its services through collaborations with the medical community. Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

the clinic's specialties is crucial in guaranteeing its patients receive the same quality of care for the same low price, and do not end up financially burdened by services provided at larger medical facilities.

Alongside expansion, most interviewees' hopes for the clinic in the next 100 years included funding. Maureen Sanders, current president and CEO of the clinic, looks forward to establishing an endowment for the clinic. "If we can collectively get the board, the staff, our existing donors, the Charity Guild, the Sisters of Charity, everybody on board to create this endowment and put in place some financial stability for the future – that's my number one priority," she explained.⁵ Creating an endowment for the San José Clinic is an ambitious and important goal in the clinic's strategic plan.

Nonprofits often live "paycheck to paycheck," Sanders noted, and the clinic has been no exception for the past ninety-nine years. Having a reliable source of income from the endowment to support the daily operations would



ease the tension surrounding money each year and allow the board and healthcare workers to focus more on the quality of care, expanding services, serving more people, and growing in other aspects. Dr. Michelle Herrera, the current board chair, vigorously echoes Sanders's sentiment and is helping with the endowment campaign she hopes will secure "the next hundred years for the clinic."⁶ Considering all that the clinic has done so far without an endowment, a stable financial future should allow it to set an example and inspire other healthcare providers with its leadership and compassion.

The clinic's endowment campaign is not the only effort taking place to secure funds. The San José Clinic values its donors and hopes they deepen their involvement. Stan Marek, a Houston businessman, philanthropist, and former board member for the CHRISTUS Foundation and Catholic Charities, noted that parks and museums receive vast donations, as much as \$50 million, and he hopes that "somebody steps up and says, 'Here's \$10, 15, 20 million. Let's see if we can make a difference with the poor.'"⁷ A donation of that kind could inspire a landslide of donations directed toward helping the clinic, those in need of healthcare, and those living in poverty.

When asked about their dreams for San José Clinic in the next 100 years, many hoped the clinic will no longer be needed. Although the clinic provides a template for caring for the underserved, Kimberlyn Clarkson, the clinic's chief advancement officer, noted, "Of course, we hope that in a hundred years the underserved don't exist." Paule Anne Lewis, former CEO of the clinic (2011-2018), agreed. Her vision for the future includes a clinic "where they have no option but to take insurance, or at least federally or state-subsidized insurance plans," because everyone will be insured. Such a change would force the clinic to happily change its business model to fit a more universal healthcare system.⁸

The San José Clinic has always dedicated itself to serving the poor and uninsured in the belief that healthcare is a basic human right. Former board member Diana "Didi" Garza, Ed.D., passionately expressed her feelings, saying, "I believe that healthcare is one of those things that everybody should have access to. So, in a perfect world, we would not have to have places like San José ... [T]he goal in my heart would be ... that San José Clinic would become part of the healthcare system of the United States, and people would still be welcomed to come and get healthcare services that they need when they need them."⁹ Equal access to healthcare is the ultimate, perhaps unattainable, goal of many people who serve the clinic, and they will hold onto that hope in the next 100 years.

Equal access to healthcare transcends physical health in people's lives. It can also mean the ability of a patient to

During Hurricane Harvey, the clinic assisted in parts of the Houston region where people could not access medical care, including Brazoria County where they conducted over 250 patient care visits.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

maintain their job and for children to continue going to school. Elias Cortina, a member of the clinic's board of directors, stressed the unfortunate current situation. "Until we have some type of national healthcare that really is there for everyone, we're going to need these types of clinics that help provide preventative care to help keep people healthy and out of the emergency room and out of serious degradation of health," he said. "If you're not healthy, you can't learn, you can't work. That's why I think it's so important to do that. Again, I think that's what Jesus would have taught, right? That you have got to help others."¹⁰

Given the slow progress toward equal access to healthcare for everyone, the clinic's supporters hope it can venture outside of Houston and serve people in need on a national level. Larry Massey, president of the Scanlan Foundation and former San José Clinic board chair, believes that the clinic's model is "something that could be transported across the country." He added, "It is definitely an answer, or at least one of the answers, to the healthcare crisis."¹¹

Achieving a well-known national status would be an enormous feat for the San José Clinic, but the uniqueness and endurance of the clinic comes from its innovative volunteer model. Admiring the clinic's deftness, Cortina attributes much of the success to "keeping an agile mindset within the clinic to make sure that we continue to think creatively and pivot and adjust to things, to factors, and the situations coming at us [the clinic]." He believes that mindset will bring the clinic to another centennial.¹²

Although the clinic has a loyal base of volunteers, donors, and patients, it has struggled with gaining the attention of the media to tell its story and to increase awareness of its services. Along with the rest of the San José community, Sister Pauline Troncale, former clinic director (1990-1992) and a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, hopes that the clinic builds on its foundation and tells its story. As a director, she said, "I felt like I was talking all the time for United Way [a major donor to the clinic], and I'd go out and speak and try to get the story out there." Following a similar example in the next 100 years would "give energy to the future and say [the clinic has] come a long way in healthcare and in serving the poor."¹³

Gaining media attention has long been a strategy for nonprofits to attract donors and expand their outreach to the desired demographics. Former board member, Robert Parsley, who followed his father in service to the clinic, believes the clinic's biggest challenge is getting proper recognition for the services it provides. The clinic is often regarded as the "best kept secret" in Houston. The problem is that it does not want to be a secret. While the clinic has accomplished a great deal and become highly regarded over the past century, media attention can help the clinic reach its future goals. Getting the word out can help secure



His Eminence Daniel Cardinal DiNardo of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston enjoys the festivities at the 2021 Art with Heart.

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

the clinic's financial stability, expand its volunteer base, inspire others in healthcare, and reach more people in need. Dr. Herrera also noted that the clinic will need to develop a clever marketing plan to stimulate these efforts. The ability to showcase available services and community events would significantly increase the clinic's reach to more people in need.¹⁴

Through faith-based work, the clinic has managed to reach a milestone few nonprofits achieve: the celebration of its centennial. In the clinic's 2019 Annual Report, His Eminence Daniel Cardinal DiNardo wrote that the clinic's triumphs could be attributed to "the dedication of the many volunteers, staff members, and charitable supporters." He added that with their support, "San José Clinic may look forward to another 100 years of providing high-quality, dignified healthcare to our friends and neighbors."¹⁵

In the next century, the clinic hopes to bridge the health gap between the privileged and the uninsured population who often fall between the cracks of a challenging healthcare system without the clinic's help. With dignified services and generations of volunteers, donors, and patients, the clinic leaders believe they have the people in place to accomplish the clinic's future goals to save lives and establish a culture where health is a priority. Finally, the San José Clinic hopes to celebrate yet another centennial of helping those in need. ◊

Alondra Torres is a senior history major at the University of Houston with a keen interest in the lack of accessibility to healthcare and resources, particularly in the Latinx community.