



*Sister Pauline Troncale, fourth from right, ran the San José Clinic from 1990 to 1992, with faith at the center of her work. She recalled once receiving an anonymous donation of a \$100 bill stapled to a blank sheet of paper. Later that day a mother brought in her son who suffered from severe heat rash because they had no air conditioning. The staff saw that as a sign and used the money to purchase the family a window air conditioner.*

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

## Hometown Heroes – The Women Behind the San José Clinic

By Sarah Chikhani

In the early 1990s, Sister Annette McDonagh and Sister Pauline Troncale carpoled to work at San José Clinic in Houston’s Second Ward. Every morning, Sister Annette, a pharmacist in her seventies, would bless the clinic with a splash of holy water and pray that she would not make any mistakes. Recalling the story with a laugh, Sister Pauline, who was CEO of the clinic at the time, thought to herself, “Oh, gosh! Pauline, you should be sprinkling your whole office with holy water!”<sup>1</sup>

Over the last one hundred years, the San José Clinic has evolved in every aspect. From the services it provides to its impact on the health and wellbeing of the community, all of this has happened under the leadership of women. The goals and values of the clinic have remained consistent throughout the years with a commitment to providing medical care to the impoverished, undocumented, low-income, uninsured, and underinsured residents of the Houston area. With approximately 25 percent of Texans lacking health

insurance and many falling below the poverty line, the San José Clinic has become fundamental to the community.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the San José Clinic’s history, women have been involved in almost all the operations from fundraising to volunteerism, and they have always been at the helm, whether nuns or laywomen. This began with the Charity Guild of Catholic Women, who cofounded the clinic, and carried over to the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, who were trained in medical care and administration, and the professional businesswomen who have run the clinic over the last twenty-four years. By establishing, running, and supporting the clinic, these women established healthcare as a human right and protected the lives of other women, children, and families.

### Charity Guild of Catholic Women

Although Monsignor George T. Walsh’s investigation into the high infant mortality rate of Mexican children in

Houston led to the creation of the Clínica Gratuita (later the Mexican Clinic and now San José Clinic) in 1922, he relied on the local chapter of the National Council of Catholic Women to help raise money to start the clinic. These women, who later organized as the Charity Guild of Catholic Women, operated in the Progressive Era tradition of social housekeeping that brought women out of the home and involved them in activities that made life better for their families and communities. Under the leadership of Katherine (Mrs. Lucian B.) Carroll and Theodora (Mrs. W. E.) Kendall, fifty-nine women contributed a dollar each to rent the clinic's first location at 1900 Franklin Street, while actively seeking out Houston doctors to donate their time to provide care. They also began sewing layettes for newborns to distribute through the clinic.<sup>3</sup>

As the demand for medical care among the poor increased, the San José Clinic moved twice and remodeled its building to expand its services, including general medical care, dental care, optometry, and women's healthcare, as well as nutrition, psychological, and chronic disease counseling. The 301 Hamilton location, for example, operated over half a century from 1956 to 2010 and expanded several times. Jean Phillips, cochair of the Charity Guild centennial committee and former San José Clinic board member, described it as impressive, not only "given how much equipment, and files, and materials, and whatever else you need to run a clinic that they crammed into such a tiny space, but also how efficiently it was run."<sup>4</sup>

Financially the Charity Guild of Catholic Women far exceeded expectations. They opened a consignment shop in Montrose in 1952 to support the clinic. By 1960, the guild had achieved nonprofit status and purchased the property for its current home at 1203 Lovett Boulevard. What began with an initial gift of \$59 ballooned significantly. The guild has donated over \$3 million to the clinic since 1982 and continues to make an annual gift. Additionally, the women have given in excess of \$6.3 million to 153 different charitable organizations dedicated to helping children.<sup>5</sup> In addition



*The Charity Guild hosted the first annual Christmas party for the clinic in 1927, and it has carried on that tradition even since, with aid from other partners. Volunteers gather, as they did here in 2018, well in advance to wrap gifts, and prepare games, crafts, and treats.*

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.



*Anne and Dr. George Quirk have volunteered with the clinic since the 1960s. They have been Mr. and Mrs. Claus at the annual Christmas party since the mid-1980s, including the drive-through event during COVID.*

Photo courtesy of the San José Clinic.

to the annual gift, the Charity Guild sponsors specific programs at the clinic such as its patient Christmas party, which dates back to 1927, and a back-to-school event that provides children with books and school supplies.

One of the key factors in the guild's success is that the women have always been a "sisterhood" dedicated to supporting each other, explained Mary Frances Fabrizio, a member of the Charity Guild centennial committee and former San José Clinic board chair.<sup>6</sup> Their financial, philanthropic, and proactive contributions coupled with Msgr. Walsh's recognition of such efforts laid the groundwork for a successful clinic and charitable organization that have both blossomed over the last 100 years.

## Auxiliaries

During the clinic's early years, few women had the opportunity for a professional education in medicine other than nursing, yet women provided much needed services. The Women's Auxiliary of the Harris County Medical Society, organized in 1919 by Mrs. S. C. Red, promoted a year-round education program in the area. By the time the local auxiliary reached its fiftieth anniversary in Houston, it was thriving and sponsoring activities like a movie benefit in support of its varied projects, including the San José Clinic.<sup>7</sup>

Anne Quirk, a member of the Charity Guild of Catholic Women and the auxiliary for the Houston Dental Society, observed that "all the [auxiliary] ladies were willing to serve." Dentists were required to do community service, such as volunteering at the San José Clinic, and the women telephoned doctors' offices and created service journals every month, including an honor roll for those who had served at the clinic. The ladies met at a friend's home, going over a list of needs and calling the dentists they knew in the area to volunteer. Anne's husband, Dr. George Quirk, was

one of the dentists recruited to the San José Clinic on behalf of the ladies' efforts. He began volunteering in the 1960s and remained until his retirement in the early 2000s but continued to consult. In addition, Anne pointed out the dental auxiliary worked on outreach in the community, using "women in many capacities ... to get the dental health needs across to the public and to the children."<sup>8</sup>

As a group, the women, some of whose husbands practiced in other specialties, united and served in different capacities. One lady's husband was a podiatrist who enlisted podiatry volunteers to work at the clinic. Furthermore, auxiliary women, Quirk explained, "brought their skills from their husbands' businesses or from their churches to [serve on] the board because the ladies had the time to come to these meetings."<sup>9</sup> This allowed the clinic to continuously advance by bringing in volunteers and staying on top of medical care. The auxiliaries – made up solely of women at the time – represented another group of all-female organizations that played a fundamental role at the San José Clinic in terms of volunteerism and cohesion.

### Ministries of Healing

Initially, Charity Guild member Theodora Kendall took on a leadership role at the clinic until the late 1930s when Mrs. Arthur Clark, a registered nurse trained at St. Mary's Nursing School in Galveston, began serving as the clinic's superintendent. Clark volunteered her time through World War II, keeping the clinic open with a skeleton staff. After the war, Bishop Christopher Byrne asked the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, who ran St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Houston's Fifth Ward, to take over management of the clinic, which they did under the direction of Sister Mary Leonardine and Sister Mary Manuela on October 1, 1946. The congregation, based in New Jersey, stepped in as the clinic unexpectedly grew at a rapid pace and needed more experienced direction. After years of quality leadership, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception felt they needed to provide more assistance to St. Elizabeth Hospital and resigned from the clinic's management in 1954.<sup>10</sup>

Bishop Wendelin Nold, who succeeded Bishop Byrne in 1950, then turned to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate



*Sr. Annette McDonagh joined the clinic as a pharmacist in 1985 and started each day by sprinkling a little holy water in the pharmacy to prevent mistakes.*

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

Word, a Houston congregation, to run the clinic. The organization had been working in Houston since 1886, when the Sisters of Charity first entered into an agreement with Harris County Commissioners Court to provide care for the sick. From the time these women took over management of the San José Clinic in 1954, they put forth tireless efforts toward their patients, and they have remained involved with the clinic, even after laywomen began serving in the director's position in the late 1990s.

The longest serving director, Sister Teresa (1966-1985) was described as a large woman who always wore a white habit. Anne Quirk noted, "She was afraid of nothing. She could handle anything that came in the door." Having a strong, resilient woman as a leader behind the clinic for an extended period of time certainly played a role in the clinic's success. She and Sister Clara, her assistant who oversaw the dental clinic, were among the dozens of dedicated clinic staff members that lived at St. Joseph's Hospital Convent when they worked at San José Clinic.<sup>11</sup>

The clinic and its community partners implemented programs to help mothers and children, such as OBGYN services; the Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC); and support groups for women experiencing emotional stress. University of Texas Health Science Center (UT Health) professor Dr. Margaret Carter McNeese served as chairman of pediatrics at the San José Clinic in the 1980s and continued to volunteer after that. She worked in partnership with the clinic and UT Health to create a WIC program at the clinic by 1982. WIC safeguards the health of low-income women, infants, and children under six by providing nutrient rich foods, information on healthy eating, and referrals to healthcare. This service, which continued into the early 1990s, was a fundamental attribute for struggling single mothers and families, whose children were found to be anemic due to poor nutrition. The clinic touched the lives of these patients in a setting where patients felt comfortable. Dr. McNeese recalled, "from the nuns all the way down to the patients, it became family." Dr. McNeese was honored by the Charity Guild of Catholic Women for her notable contributions to the clinic in 1982.<sup>12</sup>

Sister Annette, who often gave clients free medication,



*Sr. Angela Lamb became the new clinic administrator in 1954.*

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

is one of the many women behind the clinic who offered medical care coupled with a special dose of endearment, tenderness, and genuine care. In 1986, the *Houston Chronicle* reported, “a 54-year-old woman walked into San José Clinic where patient fees averaged \$4 per visit. The woman paid nothing for the three-month supply of medicine the pharmacist gave her to control her diabetes and other problems. The medicine normally sells for \$75 wholesale.”<sup>13</sup> She and thousands of other patients experienced improved health outcomes from the clinic’s combination of medical services and empathy the sisters offered behind the scenes.

Sister Margaret Bulmer, who served as clinic director from 1985 to 1990 and from 1992 to 1998, was beloved by the staff members and patients alike. She made a lasting impression with her empathy and ability to make everyone feel at ease. Not only did she serve the clinic’s patients, but she also brought in those she saw outside the facility in need of medical care. To support equal care for all, she advocated for a study to see how more of their patients could qualify for Medicare and Medicaid.<sup>14</sup>

Sister Margaret remains a humanitarian. Recently, she visited a mural honoring Houston native George Floyd, who was killed in May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by a city police officer who knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes. She reflected, “It crossed my heart several times, prompting me to pray for him and his family.” Moved to pay her respects at the mural in his historically black Third Ward neighborhood, she wrote, “George Floyd grew up so very close to us here at the Villa de Matel [home to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word]. In fact, it took me nine minutes to drive there. As short as my little pilgrimage was, it seemed to lead to a distant land, where the roads

were littered and crumbling, where homes were shuttered or tumbling. Reaching the mural, which is painted on the side of an old corner market, I saw and sensed more keenly in those streets the racial disparities that were a part of why and how George Floyd died. It was sad and sobering.”<sup>15</sup>

The dawn of the twenty-first century saw more changes, and it was women who navigated these waters. Directors Stacie Cokinos, Paule Anne Lewis, and Maureen Sanders have brought the clinic into the modern age with the advent of email, electronic patient records, and additional medical partnerships – including membership in the Texas Medical Center. And, perhaps most importantly, in partnership with CHRISTUS Foundation, the San José Clinic moved to a new, state-of-the-art building, which has enabled it to expand patient services.

The contributions and hearts of the women behind the San José Clinic are reminiscent of Nobel Peace Prize winner Mother Teresa, who is best known for her work with the poor in India and founder of the Missionaries of Charity. She worked on building nursing homes, hospices, and shelters for orphans and sought help for those in need. Her extensive work is reflective of the women who similarly gave of their time and raised money to help the poor in Houston by providing medical care through the San José Clinic. Their contributions have changed thousands of lives, although the women frequently operate behind the scenes.

The San José Clinic’s authenticity lies within its pure and sincere spirit of togetherness, its bond of sisterhood, and the familial relationship formed with the patients. This hidden jewel has been steadfast for one hundred years thanks to the women who have served there. The San José Clinic owes much of its longevity to the women from the Charity Guild

of Catholic Women, to the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, the directors, auxiliaries, and volunteers. They worked to further the cause of women and families through their leadership, strength, compassion, and business acumen that enabled the clinic to grow and minister to those in need. ◊

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*Sr. Margaret Bulmer served two stints in the 1980s and 1990s as the director of the San José Clinic. Beloved by staff and patients alike, she has remained committed to social justice as her reflections on visiting the George Floyd memorial in Houston’s Third Ward illustrate.*

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

