



A Pillar of Hope in a Hard-hit Hometown

THE 2008 FOSTER G. MCGAW PRIZE WINNER | BY TERESE HUDSON THRALL

Downtown Lewiston, Maine, had fallen on hard times, with few well-paying employers and numerous dilapidated buildings lining the streets. James Cassidy, president and CEO of St. Mary's Health System, admits he often avoided the worst city blocks when driving around with physicians he wanted to recruit. "The building insides were often worse than the outsides, and the outsides were pretty bad," he says.

Cassidy decided St. Mary's could help by doing something out of the ordinary: Building townhouses. He was inspired by the Catholic sisters who founded the hospital. "They would have asked, 'What's the greatest need in the community?'" he says. "And they would have tried to meet that need." The project to build 12 1,700-square-foot units was launched in 1999.

The town houses were sold at affordable rates, allowing former renters to become homeowners; that, in turn, brought more stability to the community. The project is just one of several that St. Mary's has undertaken in recent years to improve the lives of the 107,000 residents in Androscoggin County, including 36,000 in the town of Lewiston. Many of the residents are poor; Lewiston's median household income is \$25,000, and 12 percent of the county's 42,000 households are at poverty level. St. Mary's Health System spent \$9.5 million on uncompensated care last year, amounting to 5.6 percent of the health system's annual expenses.

Moreover, the health system spent nearly \$3 million on its community programs in 2008, which focus on a number of areas. For instance,

the Lots to Gardens program—in which vacant city lots are transformed into vegetable gardens—provides fresh produce for the community and helps at-risk youth learn job skills and gain a sense of hope. A downtown clinic provides culturally sensitive care for Somali immigrants.

For its many programs, St. Mary's Health System earned the 2008 Foster G. McGaw Prize for excellence in community service. The \$100,000 prize is sponsored by the American Hospital Association, Baxter International Association and Cardinal Health Foundation.

Building from Scratch

Turning good intentions into reality isn't always easy. When Cassidy decided to build housing downtown, he had to sell his trustees on the idea and line up financing. "The board asked a lot of questions," he says. "But in the end they voted unanimously in favor of the project."

St. Mary's donated \$250,000 and led a fundraising effort for another \$250,000. It partnered with several banks, local and state agencies and the city of Lewiston to construct 12 units in an area of town with a 37 percent poverty rate. Total cost of the project was \$2.2 million.

Michael Grimmer, St. Mary's vice president of facilities, oversaw construction of each townhome. It was the first downtown housing project since 1940, and helped spur other downtown improvements, including a satellite facility for a local college, new rental housing and the renovation of a public theater. "St. Mary's was a pioneer; the project had a transforming effect on the housing inventory there, with more than \$15

million in investments following that initiative," says Greg Mitchell, who was Lewiston's assistant city administrator for economic development when the townhouse project started and is now economic development director in Portland, Maine.

The project qualified for public grants, allowing buyers to purchase units on a sliding scale from \$40,000 to \$80,000, with the grants making up the difference. In an effort to encourage buyers to stay, the program lets those who stay for 10 years sell their unit and keep all the profits. Those who sell earlier must pay back the difference between the price they paid and the \$80,000 initial market value.

Grimmer points out that the project gave lower income residents their first chance to own something brand-new. That was definitely a draw for Jessica Golder, 24, who purchased a unit in 2005 with her husband.

"Everything else in our price range was a fixer-upper in bad shape, and it would have ended up being way too expensive for us," she says. Considering the economy—Golder's husband is now working but was laid off twice in the last six months—she's glad they chose a new, inexpensive home.

Golder is just the type of owner the project's initiators had in mind. Nicknamed "the Warden," Golder is a stay-at-home mom who keeps an eye on the neighborhood and speaks up if she sees something she doesn't like. "The



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entire neighborhood is changing for the better," she says. The town-house owners are close-knit, loaning each other needed items and celebrating the Fourth of July together each year.

Lately, it seems that spirit is spreading through the neighborhood. "People from other buildings are starting to come outside more and I'm getting to know them," Golder says. "Every city needs a sense of ownership, and even some of the renters are starting to feel this way."

Fitting Care with Culture

Not far from the townhomes sits the B Street Community Center, housing 12 agencies that serve the needy. In 2003, St. Mary's opened a medical clinic there; most of the 525 monthly visitors are covered by Medicaid and self-pay patients are allowed to purchase care on a sliding scale.

Although the clinic runs at a loss, Cassidy says it's an important part of St. Mary's work. "The clinic provides health care in a community where there are no other providers," he notes. It has two full-time physicians, a visiting nurse midwife and cultural brokers who help the providers understand the sizable number of Somali patients. An estimated 3,000 Somali refugees have moved to Lewiston since 2001.

Jean Kahn, R.N., a certified nurse midwife, makes weekly visits to the clinic. She's learned a lot about Somali culture in the last four years, including how to make adjustments for pregnant women participating in Ramadan, a month-long religious observance that includes fasting during daylight hours.

Kahn has worked with women to find ways that they can participate in the holiday and maintain a healthy pregnancy. For instance, if a woman is still early in her pregnancy and wants to fast, Kahn recommends that she eat a full meal before the sun rises and keep a bottle of water on the nightstand so that she can take sips whenever she wakes during the night.

Although Kahn has learned from the clinic's cultural brokers that pregnant women are not required to go without food, she has "come to appreciate that Ramadan is more than just fasting. The reason women want to fast is that they want to be part of their community. My patients respect that I try to meet them halfway, instead of just saying, 'No, you can't do this.'"

That attitude keeps patients coming back

and receiving care that they might not receive otherwise. "If you can't provide care that makes sense to someone in his or her own culture, they will not use your health system," Cassidy says.

Growing Good Nutrition

Some community programs St. Mary's has undertaken are the result of serendipity. "One summer I was walking around downtown and realized one of the reasons it looked so terrible was that a lot of vacant lots were grown-up with weeds," Cassidy recalls. "I was thinking about an 'adopt a lot' program."

He ended up hiring a recent college graduate, Kirsten Walter, who was interested in using gardening to engage residents in their communities. "Her vision," says Cassidy, "was a lot more exciting than ours."

Walter is now the director of the hospital's nutrition center, and Lots to Gardens is one of its programs. The nutrition center, which includes a food bank and offers cooking classes, earned an AHA Nova award last year.

The program has distributed more than 19,000 pounds of produce to low-income people. Some is donated to the food bank and some is sold at low cost at neighborhood stands. Walter says the program has another benefit: "It connects people in the community to each other and nearby land."

Hundreds of Lewiston residents, from age 5 to senior citizens, are involved in Lots to Gardens, which has 15 plots, including one at a senior housing center and another at a public housing project called Hillview. "Hillview would be a very different place if Lots to Gardens

didn't exist," says Deacon Lasagna, a teen who has worked in the program for two years. "The kids at Hillview have a lot of energy. And this gives them a good place to channel it." By working together, youths of different ethnic backgrounds also realize they have much in common.

The youngest Lots to Gardens participants are involved with Hot Tamales, which offers programming for 5- to 12-year-olds. More than 200 teen volunteers work in the gardens and perform service projects.

Lots to Gardens hires 10 to 12 teens each summer for an eight-week stint at the Youth Summer Gardener Program. The health system partners with the Lewiston Career Center, which covers the youths' pay. The young people learn about gardening and acquire potential jobs skills.

The program also offers an eight-month track for interns, former youth gardeners who serve as role models by leading young volunteers and giving workshops. The teens involved in Lots to Gardens say it's a valuable experience. In fact, Lasagna, 18, decided to postpone college so he could participate in the intern program last year, which continues into October.

Potential for Change

In the beginning, Lasagna says, he was just looking for an outdoor summer job, but the program turned out to be much more than that. "As a teen, you can feel pretty frustrated and powerless, but now I'm confident I can become a community leader," he says. "Lots to Gardens provided me with so many tools."

He also hopes to be part of making the community better. "Growing up here, you are taught to see the Lewiston area as a place you are stuck, not a place with energy and potential for change," says Lasagna, who no longer shares that view. "I feel optimistic that things are going to get better, because a lot of people are dedicated to making this a great place to live."

That attitude fits well with the St. Mary's vision for Lewiston. "All of these things have to come together to create better lives for our residents—good access to primary care, understanding good nutrition, and safe and attractive neighborhoods," Cassidy says. "Our board is invested in our mission and that means St. Mary's will go beyond enhancing the hospital. We'll be doing things out in the community." ●

