

## Equal Access Clinics



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"So sorry to interrupt, but there is a family that just arrived and is asking if they can be seen tonight. I know it's late, but I wanted to check before I ask them to come back next week," Alex, an undergraduate volunteer asks gently. She is the first face to greet all of the patients that walk into our weekly clinic and is also the first person to offer to stay late just so we can see one extra patient. As I look over towards our intake table, I can understand why she wants the clinic to see this family tonight. Two slender but strong women stand side by side, each with a small child on her hip and 3 other young children huddled between them. Each of the children look miserably sick-their eyes downturned, sniffing and coughing, and none interested in the coloring pages offered. I survey the medical student volunteers that have yet to see a patient tonight, and my eyes settle on the one student we have left, a third-year student who had mentioned that she is interested in Pediatrics. I ask Alex to hold on a second, and sidle up to the third-year student to explain the situation, as I know I am asking her to see not 1, but 5 patients. Before I can finish my plea, she jumps right in, "Of course! I'll just need an otoscope/ophthalmoscope, hand sanitizer and alcohol wipes, and a space to examine them." While I hold myself back from smothering her with a grateful hug, I hurry back over to Alex and ask her to do intake paperwork on the family. We will, in fact, be able to see them tonight. Alex flashes a big grin and rushes off to tell the family.

The above story occurred at one of our Equal Access Clinic (EAC) locations earlier this year and is only one example of so many families and individuals that come to see us each week. We are often their only avenue for access to healthcare. The Equal Access Clinic Network is a student-run network of free clinics operating in multiple locations across the city of Gainesville which aims to serve the uninsured and underinsured citizens of our community. It was founded in 1992 as 1 clinic location, and has since expanded to include 4 primary care sites operating Monday-Thursday nights, 4 specialty clinic sites, and many more specialty services that are offered at varying locations throughout every month. Each of the 4 primary care clinics has dedicated medical, undergraduate, PA and pharmacy student officers who run the clinic each week, and multiple student volunteers from each of those schools who make it possible to see the volume of patients received each night. They also have volunteer physicians (many of whom come straight from clinic or the hospital) who donate their time to provide healthcare to our community.

I grew up in Gainesville and was always very privileged to have two parents who could afford (both financially and with their time) to take me to a Pediatrician. The first time I noticed that this was not the situation for every child, was through playing volleyball in high school. At the

beginning of every season, our coach would emphasize how important it was to get our sport physicals done and turned into him ASAP in order to be eligible to play. It would then be inevitable that 2 or 3 girls would disappear from the team after that deadline had passed. Being as fortunate as I was, my parents took care of it all for me. They scheduled my doctor appointment and turned in the completed paperwork. I remember thinking (naively) "why couldn't those girls just get the physical done?" I even remember assuming they were just disorganized or procrastinators. Now, as an officer at Equal Access Clinic and seeing the mass influx of patients who come to us (especially over the summer), seeking school and sport physicals, I regret the thoughts and judgments of my younger self. I realize now that I was privileged to have easy access to healthcare. The number of patients who lack that access in our community is staggering, and while the reasons are varied, this is a significant issue and EAC is working to address it.

Our mission statement at EAC is to "Provide quality comprehensive healthcare for all", which, while a wonderful goal, does not paint a true picture of what we do every week at clinic. As an officer who has the honor of working with patients, our goals are more tangible: to get Mrs. L a blood pressure medication she can afford, to get A.J. and B.T. medically cleared to play football for their high school this season, to get Mr. J connected with free physical therapy in the community for his chronic knee pain, to educate Ms. P on why it's so important for her to check her blood sugar regularly and manage her diabetes more carefully, and so much more. In essence, we aim to make our community a little healthier one patient at a time, and it takes a village of us (undergraduate students, pharmacy students, PA students, medical students, dental students, Physical and Occupational Therapy students), all with the drive to do better for these patients and our community, to do so.

To follow up on the family I opened with, it turned out that all of the children had contracted a bacterial infection (no wonder they looked so miserable) and our Pharmacy student volunteers looked up where the antibiotics would be cheapest and easiest for the family to travel to-- less than four dollars at Wal-Mart's pharmacy. While many of us may not think about it, antibiotics can become expensive very quickly without health insurance, so this team effort made obtaining the antibiotics affordable for this family. Also, the family shared with me that coming to see us was the first time any of them had been to a doctor in 3 years, as they have not had health insurance in awhile. I thanked them for sharing their story, and also for choosing to come to us for their healthcare needs. Before they departed, one of our clinic officers smartly thought to hand them our weekly schedule of clinic times and locations, so maybe we will see them back again in the future. I know that I certainly hope we will.