

A JOURNEY TO HEALING

The next time you go to Washington, D.C., visit 1470 Irving Street, NW. While this cultural center isn't on any city tour maps, it is a home away from home for 200,000 refugees from war-torn countries in Central and South America.

To some, it looks like any old school building. To others it's a symbol of hope and healing. On the outside, a colorful mural combines vivid images from the rich life of rural Latino communities with religious icons and pictures of the indigenous peoples' struggle. A sign over the door, BIENVENIDOS, welcomes everyone. Climb up a few flights of stairs and you'll find the heart of this center, La Clinica del Pueblo, bustling with energy.

Dr. Juan Romagoza, the clinic's director, has an ambitious goal: to help his people manage their own health care, and be in charge of their lives. A picture of the martyred peace activist Archbishop Oscar Romero hangs near Dr. Juan's desk. Like his patron saint, Dr. Juan's calling is to be "a blessing on the land." At the clinic he is their Cesar Chavez, leading them toward a healthy and hopeful future.

As a surgeon in his homeland of El Salvador, Dr. Juan felt it was his sacred duty to heal the sick. He worked in the countryside, helping the *campesinos*, peasants who desperately needed his services. For this, he was accused of being a communist. In 1983, soldiers machine-gunned Dr. Juan's clinic in San Antonio Los Ranchos in Chalatenango, and

imprisoned him.

To make sure that he would never perform surgery again, they slit Dr. Juan's wrists, severing vital tendons in his hands. Then they shot him and left him to die. "You'll never return to help these people," they said. "They're right about one thing," Dr. Juan says calmly. "Since I can't practice surgery anymore, I've discovered other ways to help my people."

Dr. Juan and thousands of others escaped from El Salvador's regime of terror. Many came to the Mount Pleasant neighborhood, a sanctuary community in Washington, D.C. Many were victims of torture themselves; others were forced to watch as loved ones were murdered. The collective trauma in this community is almost beyond imagination.

Dr. Juan has devoted his life to helping his people heal from the pains of war. Instead of dwelling bitterly on his own experiences, he offers his gift of healing. He knows only too well that the horrors of war include not only physical ailments but also alcoholism, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and domestic violence. He began by training the displaced, educating them on how to provide basic services to one another.

Dr. Juan's small office doubles as a health-education center, where he dispenses a unique mix of Western medicine, indigenous wisdom, and respect for the role of the family. Now, instead of using his skills as a surgeon, he practices a more holistic approach to health care, tending to bodies, minds, and souls. Remembering his own once-poor dietary habits, he asks a young, single Latino who isn't feeling well, "How many eggs do you eat each week?" When the young man replies, "Three

dozen,” Dr. Juan takes the opportunity to talk about how some foods increase our cholesterol count. “Juan understands our needs and finds ways to meet them,” people say.

When Dr. Juan arrived, the clinic was open only on Tuesday nights. Today it serves seven thousand residents a year on a full-time basis, providing free medical care, health education, and counseling services for 60 to 70 percent of the District’s Latino community.

Those whom he helps in turn become grateful givers. Some give their time, such as the Salvadoran artist who painted the clinic’s beautiful mural; the woman who, every day, brings rice and beans, chicken and tortillas, and *atol*, a warm, comforting custard drink; and the young Latina TV reporter who buys toys for the Christmas celebration known as the Posada.

“People are on fire, wanting to give back,” says Dr. Juan. The Clinic nurtures a passion for doing good, and their generosity knows no limits. “They exemplify the Latino compliment ‘*Se tiran la casa por la ventana*’—they throw the house out the window, they give their all,” says Dr. Juan.

This spirit of generosity is the magic that keeps La Clinica working. More than one hundred community volunteers—including doctors, nurses, and staff volunteers from major hospitals—donate their time. Often you will see Ivan Menjivar, an emergency medical technician from Georgetown University Medical Center. On Tuesday nights you may find him at the clinic, taking vital signs, translating, and counseling people. “La Clinica is the heart of our community,” he says.

Trained laypersons called “health promoters” offer education and

counseling. A teacher at Lincoln Junior High School, Jamie Fischman, volunteers once a week. “It’s important to know where people are coming from,” she says, “so I can better help their children.”

Volunteers organize monthly health fairs that offer free screening and education about diabetes, hypertension, and HIV. More than one thousand people attended a recent diabetes health fair, at which a panel of Latinos talked about their experiences with diabetes.

These days, Dr. Juan asks everyone to help with the AIDS crisis. “It’s a time bomb in our community,” he says. La Clinica has the largest Latino HIV/AIDS program in the area. “Traditionally, we’ve taken care of our own problems,” Dr. Juan explains. “When we are sick, we first turn to our families, to our grandmother, our mother. AIDS is a new problem—as a people, we are just learning how to deal with it. We must educate, break down the barriers, and integrate everyone,” he says. Clinic counselors go from door to door and to neighborhood soccer matches to distribute flyers about the virus.

La Clinica is much more than a medical facility. It is also a social center, one of the few places where these people can go and feel at home. The Posada, La Clinica’s annual Christmas fiesta for patients and their children, dramatizes Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem. People walk in a candlelit procession from place to place, asking in song, “Have you room for us to spend the night?” Finally, someone welcomes them into their home; often it is the poorest family. The story of Mary and Joseph traveling to a strange land and staying with the shepherds echoes the lives of these Latino people who are far away from their homes, seeking shelter and healing in a new land.

La Clinica's brand of community medicine also includes advocacy. "Come, participate and talk about your health concerns," urges a flyer for a clinic-sponsored public meeting. "If La Clinica didn't exist, more people [would be] in the expensive ER at hospitals," Dr. Juan reminds the policymakers, government officials, and a variety of funders that help support La Clinica's programs. When the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Community Health Leadership Program honored Dr. Juan with one of their prestigious \$100,000 awards, he received national recognition. More important, it helped to keep the clinic's mental-health program going at a time of government cuts.

Dr. Juan is well-loved in his neighborhood, and he can't walk down the street without getting stopped by people who want to talk with him. One day a drunken man staggered to his side. A strange feeling came over Juan. After a moment he realized that this was Arturo, a man from the torture squad who had slit his wrists, the man who had shot him and left him to die.

Juan stood in stunned silence for a moment. But all he saw in the broken man before him was another member of his devastated community, in need of healing. "I'm still doing the same work I did before the torture cell," he said calmly to Arturo. "As a physician, I offer to help you, too."

Arturo healed deeply that day. Juan's ability to forgive him gave Arturo a whole new outlook on life. It was a tremendous moment for Juan, too. "In spite of having suffered, we can pardon our torturers, so they can heal themselves." He adds, "People like Arturo need a special love, they need more compassion—and they need a democratic system

so they can relearn how to be human again.” Now, when Arturo sees Juan in the streets, he always asks, with deep respect, “How are you, Doctor?”

Those who had survived the unthinkable found a source of healing and renewal they would never have dreamed possible.

We are a people of weavers, weaving a better future from our suffering and pain.

RIGOBERTA MENCHU

Volunteer at your local free clinic and give the gift of health. Medical professionals and bilingual translators who want to help Dr. Juan provide free medical care, health education, mental health, and social services to immigrant Latinos at **La Clinica del Pueblo**, contact the clinic at 1470 Irving St., NW, Washington, DC 20010; 202-462-4788.