

Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge - A brief history

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 14, 2013)

I am privileged to be in the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club with Mary Lou Auxier and Jim Michel. Mary Lou and I first knew each other at Y-12 before she retired. She and I both admire what is happening at the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge, where, as the recent story Donna Smith published in The Oak Ridger stated, Jim Michel makes a difference in people's lives.

Jim is an unassuming, kind and caring individual who sincerely wants to help people and he does! Along with fellow physician Tanya Vargas, they co-direct the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge. In the short time this service has been available, literally some 2,400 plus people have been provided much needed medical help who may well have otherwise not be able to afford medical care.

So, being a historian, let me help you understand just how this phenomenal service to our community came to be...what is its history! Mary Lou shared with me a document, "The Birth of the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge by John Auxier and Mary Helen Rose, written in March 2011. She wondered if I would like to publish this material in *Historically Speaking*.

Of course, I most certainly did and I really do appreciate those of you who, like Mary Lou, think of *Historically Speaking* when you see something historical that should be published. Not a single day goes by that someone does not tell me how much they appreciate *Historically Speaking* column. I am hesitant to say too much, as I don't feel comfortable doing so, but the feedback is tremendous and I just want to say "Thank You" to those of you who appreciate what I am trying to do and who take the time to tell me so. I do appreciate it!

Now, let's learn together about the "birth of the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge" as written by John Auxier and Mary Helen Rose:

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The genesis of the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was in the Clinics of Hope USA (COH). COH grew out of the efforts of a group of men from the greater Knoxville area of East Tennessee. The group included Dr. Tom Kim, originator, and head of the Free Medical Clinic of America, located on Chapman Highway in Knoxville.

His ambition, which permeated the group, was the establishment of free medical clinics to serve the working poor and medically uninsured. Members of the group participated in a bus trip to Washington, D.C., to meet with members of congress and to display a sign on the steps of the capitol to create greater interest in the approximately 47 million uninsured persons in the USA.

Members of the group subsequently visited several other operating free clinics to ascertain the range of facilities and medical support at those sites. In addition to more local clinics, the group gave special attention to the free clinics at Hilton Head, South Carolina, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. The group also contacted the organization, Volunteers in Medicine (VIM), an enormously helpful agency.

The group decided that a formal association should be formed as a 501(c)3, and the Clinics of Hope USA was incorporated, received the approval of the IRS and a State of Tennessee license, and became an active organization. The formative group included eight persons: Randy Overbey (President); Carl Faught (Secretary); Edward Cate (Treasurer); Albert Auxier; John Auxier; Tom Kim, MD; B Ray Thompson; Hiroshi Toyohara, MD; and Randy Tyree. The overall mission was the establishment of free medical clinics.

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In the summer of 2008, John Auxier invited Dr. Tom Kim to address his Sunday School class at First United Methodist Church of Oak Ridge (FUMCOR). Dr. Kim's talk ignited a huge interest in free medical services for the uninsured poor, such that John Auxier decided to attempt the formation of a clinic in Oak Ridge. With the support and encouragement of Clinics of Hope, a meeting was held at FUMC on July 19, 2008.

All persons who would like to volunteer in such a clinic were invited. The response was amazing, with more than 100 persons attending. After the initial publicity, both citizens and organizations made monetary contributions that allowed for acquisitions of materials that were not otherwise donated. The conclusion was clear — a free clinic would be spawned by these volunteers!

At the organizing meeting, John Auxier talked about things that would have to be done before a new clinic could be opened. Among those, we would need to elect a board of governors and officers; to choose a name for the clinic; and find a site for the clinic. The group elected the following officers: John Auxier, President; Jim Giles, Vice President; John Yarbrough, Secretary; and Ann Munz, Treasurer. Mary Helen Rose served as Recording Secretary from the beginning, and later was elected Secretary.

The initial board members (governors) included James Michel, MD; Tanya Vargas, MD; Dale Allen, Glen Arnold, Ed Cate, and Mayme Crowell. Drs. Michel and Vargas agreed to be co-medical directors of the Clinic. Over the next few months, Dale Allen and Glenn Arnold resigned to put their efforts into other activities and business, and Ed Cate resigned as he was on the COH board. Later still, James Barnes, Sharon Cabe, Michael McCutcheon, and Pat Petrie were added to the board.

The new Board of Governors explored several possible sites for the new Clinic. FUMCOR owned the former church property of Trinity United Methodist Church as a result of a merger. The property included a training building, which seemed entirely suitable for the new clinic, and FUMCOR agreed to lease part of the building to the clinic for a nominal \$1/year. John Yarbrough, co-chair of Missions at FUMCOR, handled the lease agreement and continues to act as liaison with FUMC.

The men's group at Kern Methodist Church took on the bulk of the work in preparing the space for the Clinic. A hurdle became obvious when restoration of the education building was considered. It needed, in addition to the usual refurbishment, the rebuilding of a restroom to accommodate handicapped persons, and this had to be done according to City of Oak Ridge codes.

This effort included "jackhammering" up a section of concrete floor and doing extensive plumbing (the commode had to be an inch farther from the wall to meet the codes). Jim Giles and David Allen, along with other volunteer workmen, put in hundreds of hours in preparing the space for the clinic to open.

Board members considered applying for a charter and non-profit status for FUMCOR, but eventually decided to be an affiliate of Clinics of Hope USA. By the summer of 2009, the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge had finished the necessary legal paper work from the State of

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Tennessee to be an affiliate of COH. FMCOR signed an Operating Agreement with COH on November 4, 2009. (Note: In March 2011, the COH board of governors decided they would like FMCOR to be a separate corporation, and that process began.)

Active solicitation of medical support personnel and equipment was initiated. A great contribution was given by the Methodist Medical Center of Oak Ridge (MMC) in the form of a commitment to provide significant medical supplies, laboratory services, and imaging. Obviously, there were and are limits on the amount of assistance, but it was and is generous!

A major factor in the preparation and startup of the clinic was the diligent work of Ed and Nancy Cate. They had extensive experience with Dr. Kim's clinic, and they were strongly focused on the factors which could easily make or break the new clinic.

The countless hours that they devoted to the legal work and managerial details were crucial to the preparation for the operation of the clinic. With their efforts, the efforts of Drs. Michel and Vargas, and the general support of the board, the church, and the public, a date was set for seeing the first patients.

The clinic opened for patients on January 15, 2010, with hours all day Friday and on Saturday mornings. Volunteers were at the clinic every morning to answer the telephone and make appointments. A Grand Opening was held on January 25 in the Fellowship Hall of the Trinity Church building, with TV personality Bill Williams as the master of ceremonies and a sizable crowd present.

At the Board meeting on July 25, 2010, John Auxier announced that he was stepping down and going off the Board, as he "felt his usefulness to the clinic had about run its course." His mission of getting the Clinic up and running had been achieved. At the next Board meeting on September 1 (John's last meeting), the following officers were elected: Jim Giles, President; John Yarbrough, Vice President; Ann Munz, Treasurer; and Mary Helen Rose, Secretary.

By the end of the first year of operations, the clinic had seen over 700 patients in about 1500 office visits. Finances were in good order, handbooks and other operational documents were in place.

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Thanks to Mary Lou for sharing this and to John Auxier and Mary Helen Rose for writing the history of the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge. This is an excellent example of what Oak Ridge is capable of doing that is rarely seen elsewhere.

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John Auxier, Dr. Kim and Britney Bailey of Channel 10 when they did a story on the Free Medical Clinic of Oak Ridge



It takes a lot of volunteers to make a free medical clinic work

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Dr. Vargas co-director of the Free Medical Clinic



Dr. James Michel co-director of the Free Medical Clinic