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Doctor believes in brotherhood of man

Life of service inspired by Pink Floyd

By Mark Curnutte • mcurnutte@enquirer.com • January 25, 2009



The 98-pound homeless woman wore a fraying lavender bathrobe over her white T-shirt and pajama bottoms.

Soft purple slippers with pink bows covered her feet. She struggled to prop herself up onto the examination table at the Center for Respite Care in Avondale.

She complained of a bad head cold and painful leg cramps that she said were related to her failing kidneys. She was a dialysis patient, HIV-positive and deaf.

Her doctor, Bob Donovan, wearing a blue dress shirt and tie with a stethoscope hanging from his neck, looked her in the face when he spoke; she could read lips.

"What I want to make sure you're doing is getting plenty of fluids," Donovan said. She nodded yes.

He felt her ankles and feet. He then said he wanted to listen to her breathing. He put the stethoscope on her back and moved it from spot to spot with his left hand. His right hand landed softly and rested on her right shoulder.

"We can talk about providing compassionate care, physically and mentally," Donovan said later, "but we touch people. That's like 50 percent of what we do: touch people who are told they aren't worthy of being touched."

Donovan, 54, has dedicated his medical career to treating homeless people.

A brother in the Marianist Catholic religious order, Donovan lives in Over-the-Rhine and works among the poorest of the poor. For 15 years, he worked half-time with the homeless. For the last five, they've become his full-time vocation.

He was the first physician to work on Cincinnati's first medical van for the homeless in 1988 and marked a trail for other doctors to follow.

Still, he is the only one doing the work exclusively. He makes calls on the homeless at four locations - three in Cincinnati and one in Covington - and still pulls one afternoon shift a week on the mobile homeless medical clinic.

'He listens'

Donovan slowly cut the layers of blood-stained white gauze wrapped around the frostbitten feet of David Carlson. The 47-year-old homeless man had worked cleaning parking garages.

A month ago, he said, his feet got wet at work on a bitterly cold day. Frostbite set in quickly.

The last piece of gauze came off Carlson's right foot in one long strand - revealing shriveled toes and skin that was either black or gray and peeling.

"They're (doctors at University Hospital) talking about getting rid of most of the toes and grafting the top of my foot," said Carlson, wearing red sweat pants and a white 1990 Cincinnati Reds World Championship sweat shirt.

Donovan felt the ankles.

Healing remarkably well, considering the damage, he said. Circulation was good. The smell in the room was of rubbing alcohol and, perhaps psychosomatically, of burnt flesh.

Donovan and a nursing assistant then washed Carlson's feet. The doctor put on fresh gauze and secured his left hand beneath Carlson's upper arm to help him rise from the

table. The patient pulled his red knitted slippers back on.

Carlson had done most of the talking during the 10-minute process. Donovan asked a few questions and reminded the man of the importance of getting to his next appointment at UC hospital.

"He listens," Carlson said. "Most doctors don't listen, but Doc does. He tries to help you solve your problems."

Carlson had been at the Center for Respite Care since shortly after the frostbite set in. It is a 14-bed step-down facility in an old mansion on Washington Avenue.

The patients, all homeless, are either postoperative or receiving ongoing treatment for cancer, diabetes or another disease at nearby University Hospital. Donovan helped found the center more than five years ago. Patients have a warm bed to sleep in and receive three meals a day, clean clothing, medication and medical attention from Donovan.

The center operates on a combination of private and foundation grants, federal money and funding from UC and Christ hospitals and TriHealth - the network that operates Good Samaritan and Bethesda North hospitals.

"The idea is that they have a chance to heal here, something that's hard to do in a shelter," Donovan said.

The atmosphere is calm, safe and nurturing.

"Bob sets the tone," said Mary Beth Meyer, center director. "His sense of compassion and spirituality drive everything he does in his life."

In the hallway of his three-room apartment on Elm Street in Over-the-Rhine, Donovan cradled his Bible in his hands.

He sat in a wooden rocking chair. He wore blue jeans, a gray T-shirt and unbuttoned plaid flannel shirt. A single candle burned from atop a white plate on the table in front of him.

He reflected on his patients.

"It's sad all the time," Donovan said. "The horrors they have to go through, that a lot of times I know how I could help a person, but the resources just aren't there to do it. It's kind of stunning."

Prayer sustains him. So do music and friends and family - his mother, Catherine, 82, lives in Finneytown. A life outside of his work helps Donovan maintain longevity where burnout is commonplace.

Pink Floyd inspired him

He attended St. Xavier High School, graduating in 1972 before earning a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Cincinnati. He then went to the Medical

College of Ohio in Toledo, finishing in 1979, before returning to the residency program at UC. He was in private practice for four years in Springdale. The money was good. He liked the work and his partners.

But there was a pull. A fan of the rock band Pink Floyd, which he has seen 16 times in concert, Donovan noted the suffering of people who lived near him in Winton Place. He drove through Over-the-Rhine and other low-income neighborhoods, the plight of the homeless never far from his mind. In 1987, Pink Floyd released a song titled "On the Turning Away." It struck a chord with Donovan, one that had made a religious vocation an option since he was a teenager. Dots connected intellectually and spiritually.

On the turning away

From the pale and downtrodden

And the words they say

Which we won't understand

Don't accept that what's happening

Is just a case of other's suffering

Or you'll find that you're joining in

The turning away

Donovan could not turn away.

He joined the Marianists, an order of Catholic priests and brothers that uses the life and example of Mary - believed by Catholics to be the earthly mother of Jesus - as a model. At the same time he began his religious studies, first in Dayton and then in Cleveland, Donovan started working on the first medical van to serve the homeless in Cincinnati.

"I just felt this call to help people who had less access to medical care, to be part of helping the least and the people most in need. That's every day," he said.

His employer is the Cincinnati Health Network, a nonprofit organization that contracts with the city and receives federal funding.

The network does not list Donovan's salary on its income tax return, but he could make considerably more in private practice. He drives a 2001 Ford Focus with 83,856 miles on it.

Kate Bennett, chief executive officer of the health network and Donovan's boss, heard him speak to a group of medical students in Indianapolis about the path he had chosen.

"This speech gave me the flavor of who Bob is," Bennett said. "He said: 'My job is to let folks know they are a son or daughter of God, just like I am and you are.'"

Bedside vigil

Donovan once sat alone for six hours at the bedside of a homeless patient who was dying of AIDS. He stroked the man's hair and prayed for him. The man had no family.

Donovan always wears a shirt and tie as a sign of respect to his patients; many appreciate that. But it's his skill and compassion they appreciate most.

Donovan examined a man who called himself only "Patient Bob" at the Center for Respite Care. Bob, 56, a military veteran, had just had a cancerous kidney removed at the VA Medical Center in Avondale. Donovan checked incisions on the man's stomach. The cancer had spread to Bob's spinal cord.

"I don't care if he shows up buck-naked if he knows what he's talking about," Bob said. "And he knows what he's talking about."

After every patient visit, Donovan carefully filled out paperwork required by funding sources.

It's also important for the patients' ongoing treatment at hospitals.

Doctors treating homeless patients at University Hospital or the VA appreciate the follow-up care and guidance Donovan provides and the information he gives them. The goal is to help people get healthy enough to work and escape homelessness.

Dr. Joe Kiesler, a Respite Care board member, said Donovan is a mentor and led him to get involved in caring for homeless people.

Besides influencing doctors in Greater Cincinnati, Donovan has worked with the National Healthcare for the Homeless organization to establish guidelines for treating the homeless for all physicians.

"Inspiring" is the description of Donovan used by Kiesler, a family doctor and assistant professor of clinical family medicine at the University of Cincinnati who also works a shift on the medical van.

Donovan was in the 40-foot medical van parked outside Our Daily Bread at Elder and Race streets in Over-the-Rhine.

His first patient of the afternoon was Thomas Berry, a 40-year-old ex-con staying at Talbert House, a far-reaching Cincinnati-based social service agency that provides rehab and treatment centers. Berry's problem was diverticulosis. His abdomen was sensitive to Donovan's measured pressure because of the pain. He also had high blood pressure, diabetes and asthma.

Donovan has treated him for several months. Berry also needs glasses. He doesn't have any. He has an ally in Donovan.

"A lot of doctors look at you like a number of a dollar sign," Berry said. "But (Donovan) doesn't judge me. It's easier to tell him a lot of personal things and he can help you. He just sees the good in other people."

