HOMETOWN HERO: SAM CASSELL, M.D.
Still On Call — Even After Retirement

After practicing medicine for nearly 40 years, a retired doctor leads an organization whose volunteers provide healthcare to uninsured patients.

Sam Cassell experienced his share of healthcare milestones during his approximately four decades in pulmonary and internal medicine, but two life-altering encounters happened after he retired from his practice in 2001. There was a medical mission to Haiti where he worked alongside other volunteers to treat patients in the poorest sections of that country. And there was a personal vacation to Vietnam, where he and his wife befriended a Vietnamese mother and daughter. It turned out that the child, age 3 at the time, needed surgery.

“We arranged for the girl and her mother to come to New Jersey for surgery at no cost,” he says. “A doctor here paid for their transportation, and they stayed at our house for two weeks.”

Those instances of charitable healthcare sparked Dr. Cassell’s interest in volunteerism, and in 2004 he began thinking about how he could provide free medical service on the local level. He learned of a national program that offered healthcare through the use of volunteer health practitioners and used that model to recruit other medical professionals who shared his vision — building an organization that provides free primary care to low-income Bergen County residents who are working but are uninsured.

“I had to find movers and shakers, people of authority, respect and those who were looked up to in the community,” says Dr. Cassell, a Wyckoff resident. “And it wasn’t hard. Everyone I asked immediately said yes.”

After forming a team of volunteers and securing an office in Hackensack, Dr. Cassell opened the Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative (BVMI). BVMI is a licensed, ambulatory healthcare center that provides no-cost care and referrals for free specialty care to working, low-income Bergen County residents who have no health insurance. In addition to the lack of insurance, patients seeking free care must reside in the county, be employed and earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines ($696 a week), and not qualify for Medicare or Medicaid.

Dr. Cassell estimates that BVMI sees approximately 1,000 patients annually. And of those clients, many go to the office several times a year, “so it comes out to about 6,000 visits a year for the volunteers.” That’s a large number for 65 volunteer physicians, nurse practitioners, registered nurses and other professionals, “but they are very happy to see the patients.” In fact, Dr. Cassell believes there are more residents who qualify for care — they just might not know it.

Nearly 8 percent or about 75,000 Bergen County residents live below the poverty line, while more than $5,000 people in the workforce are uninsured, according to the latest U.S. Census report.

“Approximately 50 percent of our patients are Hispanic,” Dr. Cassell says, “but we have a low representation of other minorities. We should be bursting. We want to continue to spread the word about what we offer and get people accustomed to wanting medical care. We have to educate others about why it’s important to get care, to make appointments and to keep them.”

Retired from medicine for more than three years, Dr. Cassell no longer practices, but he still plays an active role on the Advisory Board. Amanda Missey, who joined BVMI in May 2014, oversees the organization’s day-to-day operations as its president and chief executive officer.

Where does Dr. Cassell see BVMI 10 years from now? “I’d like to see a director of volunteers to work with Amanda because of BVMI’s growth — we have so many people not in the medical field who are always asking to help,” he says. “But ideally, I do hope for some form of universal healthcare coverage in the future, and I’d like us to be one of the clinics to offer that care.”

Learn more about the Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative, visit bvmi.org. —Darius Amos

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—Sam Cassell, M.D., founder of Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative, Hackensack

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