

Giving Back // BY TRESKA WEINSTEIN

DOCTORS TREAT THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN THROUGH THE CRACKS

» TUCKED into a nondescript, 2,500-square-foot suite on Main Street in Great Barrington, Volunteers in Medicine Berkshires has been quietly pursuing a revolutionary model of health care since its founding in 2004. The one-stop integrative approach brings physicians, nurses, dentists, an optometrist, mental-health professionals, acupuncturists, and a nutritionist all under one roof.

When Susie Weekes came to the clinic in 2008 seeking

treatment for a growth under her eye, she was given an appointment with a dermatologist within the clinic's extensive referral network—but VIM's care didn't stop there. "They took my blood pressure and found out it was very high, and they addressed that aggressively and quickly," Weekes recalls. "In the process, they realized how much stress I was dealing with, and they lined me up with a psychiatrist in the same building. They

also took care of some dental issues immediately."

All the care she received was free. Part of a loosely connected network of 86 VIM clinics nationwide (the idea originated with Dr. Jack McConnell, who founded the first volunteer-based clinic in South Carolina in 1991), VIM Berkshires is staffed by volunteer health-care professionals, half retired. Nationally, there are 86 such clinics operating in 25 states—but this is the only one in Massachusetts. VIM

clinics depend on volunteers and receive no government funding, which means they sprout in places where people have the energy, time, and talent to make a difference. The Berkshires, with its retired and second-home population, is one such place.

Weekes started coming to the Berkshire clinic after the economic downturn in 2008 effectively killed her renovation business. "I found myself in a place I never expected to find myself, and I cer-

tainly couldn't afford health insurance," she says. "I felt immediately taken care of—I didn't feel defensive or apologetic or humiliated."

VIM is a stopgap for Berkshire County residents who "fall through the cracks," as cofounder and board chairman Marion Simon puts it. That means they may make too much money to qualify for MassHealth but not enough to afford out-of-pocket insurance. Or they might have insurance but missed a payment or two and are waiting to be reinstated. "Many people, when they have to make a choice between fixing the muffler on their car and paying their health insurance, will choose the muffler because they need the car to get to work," Simon explains. Ninety percent of VIM Berkshires' patients hold at least one job.

The idea started at a New Year's Eve party at Simon's house when she, her late husband, Leonard, and a few friends floated the idea. The clinic now has an operating budget of \$600,000 and employs several staff—dental and medical assistants and caseworkers managing patient care. Donations support the project, along with fundraising events and sales of VIM's coupon book. Although there is no requirement to do so, patients donated a total of \$13,000 last year.

The clinic served 1,000 patients last year, and recently passed the 15,000 mark in

total patient visits since it opened in 2004.

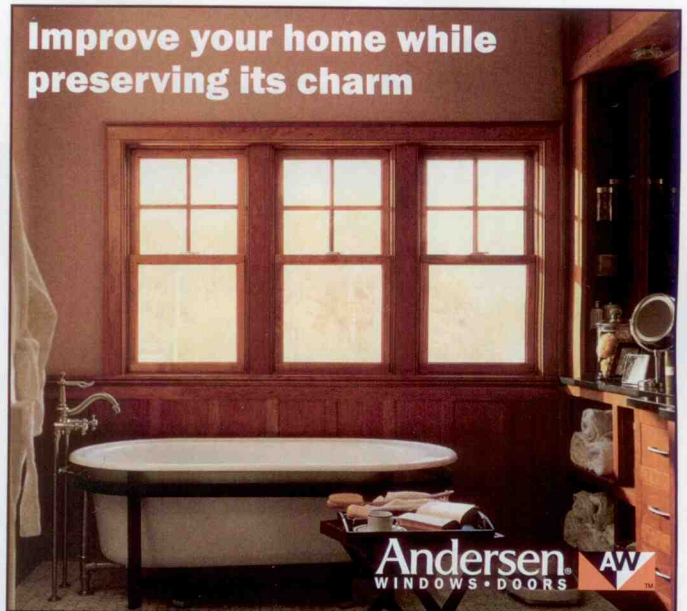
"It's an amazing model," says Jeffrey Blake, a retired cardiologist who sees patients once a week during the six months of the year he spends in the Berkshires. "It's all right in one place. If our system in general could use that model, the whole country would be better off, and I believe the cost of health care would go down."

Sometimes dramatic cases are handled by VIM—such as the young woman with undiagnosed heart disease who had a valve replacement and a hole in her heart repaired at a Boston hospital, at no cost, after a VIM physician discovered it. Singer-songwriter David Grover, one of the clinic's more high-profile patients, was fitted for a new set of dentures during the worst of the recession. But most of the time, VIM handles the kind of day-to-day care that is always needed—and, with each appointment, clinicians take the opportunity to stress preventive care.

Two dozen clinicians volunteer because "they get to practice medicine the way they thought they were going to practice when they went to medical school," says board chairman Arthur Peisner. "They can take as much time as they want with patients and get to know them—there's no insurance company looking over their shoulder."

"What keeps us coming back," confirms Blake, "is the purity of it."

Improve your home while preserving its charm



Andersen®
WINDOWS • DOORS

Andersen® insert replacement windows give you the easiest and most beautiful way to rejuvenate a home while maintaining its charm. During installation, the original window frame is kept in tact, reducing the disruption to your home. With a rich wood interior in oak, maple or pine, plus traditional detailing and custom sizes, its the perfect choice for replacing virtually any window.

Featuring high-quality
Andersen® products.
andersenwindows.com

LUMBER • MILLWORK • BUILDING SUPPLIES
HERRINGTON'S®

We share your passion.®

Lakeville, CT: 860.435.2561 • Hudson, NY: 518.828.9431 • Hillsdale, NY: 518.325.3131

www.herringtons.com • 800.453.1311 • MILLWORK DELIVERY SERVICE IS FREE IN OUR SERVICE AREA



Extraordinary Service to Buyers
and Sellers of Real Estate

**HONESTY
INTEGRITY
RESULTS**

lancerealestate.com

So. Egremont
413-644-0089

Lenox
413-637-0006

Gt. Barrington
413-528-6011

Pittsfield
413-448-2900