



Thomas R. Kelley, M.D., Understands the Impact of

helping close to home

A physician changing his communities

By Heather Morgan, APR

It was a simple strep test, an \$8 generic antibiotic, and a \$3 bottle of Tylenol. Nothing much, nothing out of the ordinary. But for the struggling single mother, it was an answer to prayers. And the immense look of relief she displayed after receiving a treatable diagnosis and free medications for her young son was something Thomas R. Kelley, M.D., will never forget. Her tears of gratitude landed in his heart, and he knew he was doing the right thing.

ANSWERING THE CALL TO SERVE CLOSE TO HOME

It wasn't the first time Dr. Kelley volunteered at a free clinic – but it was his first evening at Good Shepherd Clinic in Morrow, the clinic he co-founded, the first free medical clinic in the town just outside Atlanta, Ga.

Though Dr. Kelley had been volunteering regularly in downtown Atlanta, he felt an innate calling to serve a little closer to home...but he soon realized opportunities didn't exist to provide medical care to Morrow's underserved.

"I thought, 'what do these people do when they can't afford healthcare?'" Dr. Kelley recalls. It wasn't long before he connected with Rev. Jim Lewis of the First Baptist Church of Morrow who'd been contemplating the same thing.

"We were kind of naïve about it," Dr. Kelley admits, reflecting upon his early conversations with Rev. Lewis. "Since nothing existed, we decided to start our own clinic."

Fortunately, there was a small house behind the church where Rev. Lewis preached; though used by the youth group, the members chose to donate the space to the future clinic. With significant ambition, influence, and a corps of volunteers from both the Baptist and Presbyterian churches, Rev. Lewis and Dr. Kelley renovated the worn house into a fresh, clean clinic to serve their community.

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Left:
Dr. Kelley smiles in his office the night before heading to Haiti for another mission trip.



Dr. Kelley collects medical antiques, particularly old medicine bottles.

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After welcoming its first patient in 2000, Good Shepherd Clinic now opens its doors for the underserved twice a week.

EXTENDING A HELPING HAND STATEWIDE

And just two years after those doors first opened, Dr. Kelley began receiving calls from physicians around the state interested in starting a free clinic in their neighborhoods, too.

“I thought there should be a network, a central organization for Georgia to combine the efforts of our free clinics,” Dr. Kelley says.

Rather than wait for one to develop, Dr. Kelley began using his lunch hour to create the Georgia Free Clinic Network, an organization dedicated to the collaboration of free clinics across the state. During its first meeting, which became an annual event, volunteers from 10 clinics attended. Through initial interest, the Georgia Free Clinic Network developed a steering commit-

tee that soon drafted bylaws and transitioned the organization into a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

Over the past few years, the network has continued to expand and now thrives under the direction of a full-time executive director and active board, Dr. Kelley explains. “They’ve really embraced our vision, and I’m proud to be part of it,” he says. “As long as I live, I’ll know I did something worthwhile.”

FAMILY TIES

While Dr. Kelley was changing small-town communities in Georgia, his father, a family practice physician in Central Florida, was contemplating the future of his own career and practice. A 50-year veteran of the medical profession, he asked his son to consider joining his practice, South Seminole Primary Care, which joined South Seminole Hospital in January 2009.

Dr. Kelley couldn’t pass up the opportunity. The Georgia Free Clinic Network had successfully taken off, and Good Shepherd Clinic was also doing well; Dr. Kelley decided to step down from his position as the clinic’s local medical director to join his father in Seminole County.

But he couldn’t completely let go of the clinic he helped found, and he remains involved through fundraising and volunteer coordination. “It’s [the clinic] near and dear to my heart,” Dr. Kelley explains. “I’m really proud of it.”

FINDING THE RIGHT “PATH”

Upon moving to Central Florida, Dr. Kelley made a deal with his wife: for one year, he would abstain from volun-

Dr. Kelley at work in his office.



Dr. Kelley understands the importance of helping close to home.

teering ... just for a year, just until they got settled into their new home and new lives.

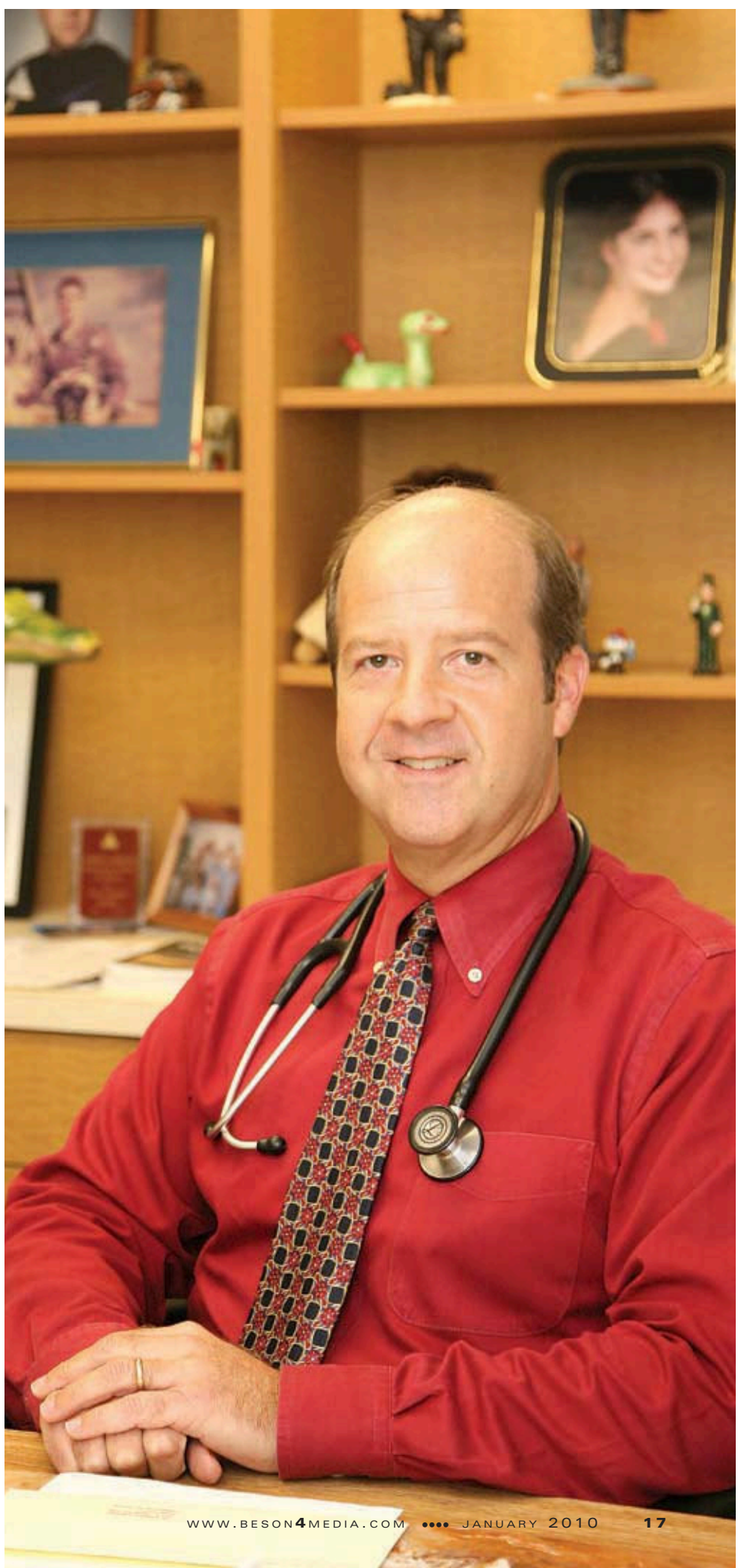
He couldn't wait for that year to pass.

Once it did, Dr. Kelley quickly found Pathways to Care, an assisted living facility in Casselberry that provides temporary care and housing for patients who, after being discharged from the hospital, don't have the financial resources to go anywhere else. Without Pathways to Care, Dr. Kelley explains, many individuals would end up homeless. "They're well enough to be discharged from the hospital but too ill to be homeless," he says. "They go to Pathways to Care until they're well enough to leave ... they receive physical, spiritual, financial, and vocational healing."

Though patients at the facility receive social services, they don't have access to a doctor, Dr. Kelley explains. So, once a month, he serves, providing residents at Pathways to Care with the medical attention they wouldn't otherwise receive. Currently, he's the organization's only volunteer physician.

Still, Dr. Kelley admits that, after another long day in the office, he's often tired and ready to head home. But he presses on, refusing to falter on his commitment to Pathways to Care. And more often than not, he leaves the facility more energized than when he arrived.

"It feels like the right thing to do," he explains quite humbly. "I've been blessed with lots of good opportunities ... and there are so many people who haven't. I can give a little of my time to people who don't have the opportunities we [my family] do. It's an indescribable sense of fulfillment."



SPREADING THE PASSION

Dr. Kelley not only dedicates his personal time to provide medical care to the underserved, but he also devotes countless hours to Seminole County Medical Society, currently serving his second year on the Executive Board and his third as the group's volunteer coordinator.

As an advocate for citizens of Seminole County, the Seminole County Medical Society embraces a strong relationship with Shepherd's Hope, Dr. Kelley explains, working to help all individuals receive medical care. Combining his passion to volunteer with his desire to encourage others to do so as well, Dr. Kelley is the liaison between the society and Shepherd's Hope, recruiting heavily for physicians to volunteer at the free clinic.

"Particularly in this economy, so many people struggle financially," he says. "When you get sick, do you get treatment or buy groceries? Do you buy medicine or pay your utility bill? This is a very real decision people have to make."

Yet, while Dr. Kelley engages peers to devote a few hours to Shepherd's Hope, he remains cognizant of the clinic's limitations; though it provides a much-needed service in Central Florida for individuals and families unable to afford medical care, often the working poor, it focuses on primary care. Many times, he explains, patients may also need to see a specialist for follow-up

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or more advanced diagnoses and treatment.

To fill this void, Dr. Kelley is working with leaders at Shepherd's Hope to develop the Healthy Seminole Project. Through this endeavor, Dr. Kelley, his volunteer committee comprised of Seminole County Medical Society members, and Shepherd's Hope aim to recruit local specialists to see at least one patient in their offices each month at no cost.

"People need something, and there are only so many people who will provide that service," Dr. Kelley says. "There's a critical need – just give two hours of your time once a month ... you'll be amazed at how rewarding it is personally, and it's something you won't be able to do anywhere else professionally.

"You have one purpose: to help individuals whatever way you can with whatever resources you have," he adds. "It's the freedom to practice medicine without the red tape."

Dr. Kelley hopes that sharing his personal experiences and memories created through volunteering will encourage other physicians to try it as well. "Once you get them inspired," he says, "they'll find the place that's a good fit, one that's right for them."

And whenever he needs a reminder of just how important volunteer physicians are, Dr. Kelley opens a particular book in his office, one created especially for him. Prior to his departure from Good Shepherd Clinic, his colleagues collected thank-you letters from patients expressing gratitude for his time and medical expertise. "If I'm having a bad day, I open that book – the words there make me feel better than anything else could," Dr. Kelley says. "It's a treasure that has a very special place in my office. I'm grateful for those memories."



BEYOND NATIONAL BORDERS

Purposefully, Dr. Kelley has kept his volunteer commitments close to home, firmly believing that "we only need to look in our own backyard to find people who need help." But he recently embarked upon something new, joining a team of physicians from Seminole County Medical Society to serve for a week in Haiti.

Led by Ralph Gousse, M.D., a native of Haiti, the physicians spent time treating patients at a clinic he established. "For him [Dr. Gousse], Haiti is local; he's so passionate that it inspired me to get involved," Dr. Kelley says. "I didn't really have an understanding of life in Haiti, so I hoped to grow as a person, to understand my own patients better, and to become a better doctor."

But the service came with a price. Prior to the mission trip, Dr. Gousse and the Seminole County Medical Society had to raise significant funds to complete the hospital, including the roof, Dr. Kelley explains. Through an intense awareness campaign, Dr. Kelley and his colleagues helped raise more than \$8,500, thanks to donations from doctors, medical staff, and even patients committed to the cause. Because of the team effort and Dr. Gousse's personal contributions, the group raised enough to complete the project, enough to



make it possible for the medical team to serve people in the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere.

FOR THE LOVE OF MEDICINE

Decades ago, Dr. Kelley may not have known the impact his time, compassion, and medical expertise would have on so many individuals. But he certainly knew medicine was in his future.

Even as a child, he had a great love for the biological sciences, and listening to his father’s stories around the dinner table simply fascinated him. It didn’t take long for the young Dr. Kelley to begin accompanying his father on visits to Winter Park Hospital, and he started pursuing his medical aspirations as an adolescent by cleaning the floors in his dad’s office.

It seems as though Dr. Kelley is coming full circle; no longer mopping floors each night, he feels privileged to partner with his father to provide medical care to families in Central Florida, to understand his patients on a personal level, to develop friendships with generations of families.

“It’s great to go to work and love what you’re doing,” Dr. Kelley says. And when he can help even more people – both in and outside of the office – it’s even better. **FD**

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