

Volunteers, Old-Fashioned Medicine Merge to Save Dennis Woman's Life

By Karen Knight | Posted: Thursday, March 17, 2016 4:03 pm

COURT HOUSE – It was "good old-fashioned medicine" that Melissa Grace credits with saving her life.

The 26-year-old Dennisville resident lost her job about a year ago, losing her medical insurance as well.

A number of health issues needed to be tackled and a friend suggested she call Volunteers in Medicine of Cape May County (VIM).

The Court House clinic is one of 100 nationally that provides medical care to the uninsured and under-insured who meet their financial requirements. It is staffed by volunteers and funded through the community.

"Everyone who came in contact with Melissa fell in love with her and wanted to help her," said Barbara Harvey, registered nurse, clinic and nursing director. "We gave her hope that we could help her when she needed it. At one point, I was seeing her weekly, and then calling her weekly to see how she was doing.

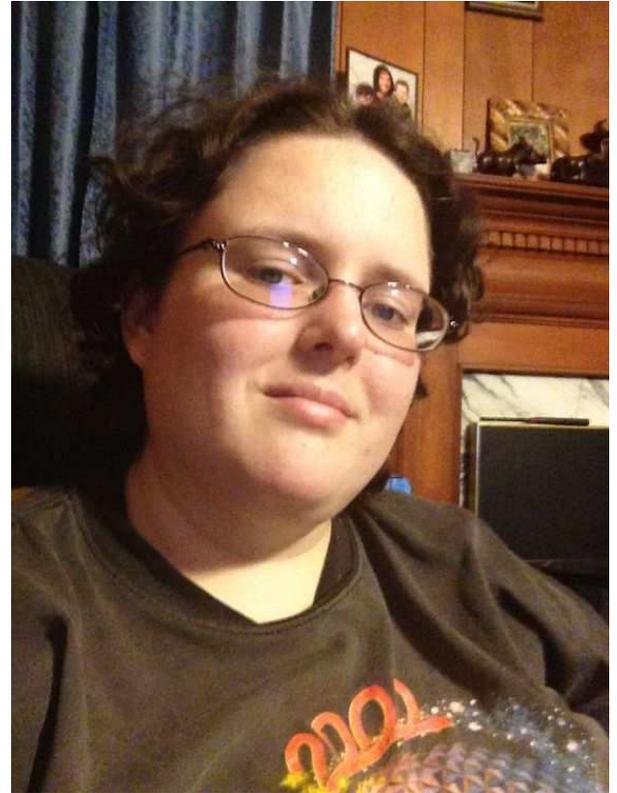
"We provide the old-fashioned medicine where there is no time limit for the doctors and nurse practitioners to spend with patients," she continued. "This means they have a lot of time with their patients and can take a special interest. It also has its minuses because things take longer, but we care deeply about our patients."

Within two weeks of her first appointment at the clinic, Grace was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. She was also anemic, and further tests showed she had a grapefruit-size mass in her pelvic region.

"They didn't know if it was pressing on any vital organs," Grace said. "They sent me to a specialist at Cooper University Hospital who said it needed to come out right away. They were shocked that I had no symptoms."

Surgery revealed the tumor was larger than expected, but Grace quickly pointed out that it was not cancerous. "Barbara really advocated for me and was with me every step of the way," she noted. "VIM saved my life."

Harvey said her biggest challenge at the clinic is acting as the "middle man" to find other doctors and specialists who will see patients for free or reduced costs. "We've had good luck with specialists at Cooper."



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Grace also has suffered from a chronic skin-based illness since 2007 that she said affects about 1 percent of the population.

"Instead of turning me away, the nurse practitioner looked up the disease and found a way to treat it," Grace said thankfully. "It's now under control and I'm almost in remission. I am still suffering from anemia but we haven't found what is causing it. I am going to see an oncologist; we're still looking for the reason I have it."

She's also lost weight and her diabetes is under control, she noted.

"VIM also helped me get medical insurance to help pay for my medical bills," Grace said. "Now I have the means to get the help when I need it."

According to Jacqueline "Jackie" Meiluta, executive director at the clinic, "Melissa was caught in the middle where she had no insurance and no one had taken the time to look at the whole picture. Our volunteers take the time and advocate for their patients."

VIM of Cape May County was established in 1999. Following an intensive three-year capital campaign, the clinic doors opened on March 12, 2002.

Meiluta said the clinic has about 500 active patients annually, and most are between 40-65 years of age. "The majority of our patients have multiple chronic diseases and require regular medication," she said.

"Our volunteers care deeply about their patients and understand that they are good people," Meiluta added. "They just don't have the means to pay for health care."

A thrift store at 20 South Main St., Court House, also helps fund VIM.

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