Birth Of The Common Ground Health Clinic

by Orissa Arend

The Common Ground Health Clinic arose in the New Orleans west bank community of Algiers above the apocalyptic flood waters in the fall of ’05. There were as many idealistic, fantastic visions for the clinic’s future as there were scruffy revolutionaries, doctors, nurses, and alternative healers converged from the Beneficent Elsewhere. Their visions, fueled by endorsements of kindness and a salve of desperation, were a beautiful thing to behold. And though they sustained me at that terrible time, I gave somewhere between a zero and a minus one to the chances that any of these visions would endure. I’d wake up in two years, I figured, and this fairy tale collective of healers, who could do anything they set their mind to, and who embraced justice as a part of health, would seem as distant a dream as the nightmare of Katrina.

I didn’t turn out that way. Who would have imagined that the New England Journal of Medicine, the Washington Post, Mother Jones, and the New York Times (they called it the New England Journal of Medicine, the Washington Post, Mother Jones, and the New York Times) would end up as many idealistic, fantastic visions for the clinic’s future? I lived in the Black Panther Party, Malik knew quite a lot about critical organizing roles and held together an odd, ever-expanding commune of people determined to help. Bodies were left to bloat on the streets of Algiers, covered by pieces of corrugated tin and ignored by guardmen passing by. Malik painted one of the bodies in the documentary “Welcome to New Orleans.”

Meanwhile Scott Crow and Brandon Darby, white activists from Austin who had worked with Malik to publicize the plight of the Angola 3, felt drawn to New Orleans to help. The Angola 3 were Black Panthers who spent decades in solitary confinement at Angola State Penitentiary for their political beliefs. Scott and Brandon brought Malik some supplies and went to look for Robert King Wilkeson, the only freed member of the Angola 3, in flooded Mid City in New Orleans proper. But they were turned away by the authorities. They returned to Austin for more supplies and this time vowed to swim to King’s house if they had to. Brandon insisted that some rescue workers go look for King. When they agreed to take King’s dog, he got into the boat and met Brandon on higher ground. Brandon and King headed for Malik’s. It had been a long walk for all of us, wondering if King was alive. Malik told Amy Goodman with Democracy Now, “While we were together, we — every evening, we used to have these dialectical discussions, and one of our main discussions was on why progressive movements have always started with such a bang and then end in such a fizzle. And we kept coming up with that we allowed our petty differences to stop us from working together.

So we founded Common Ground. Prior to the storm Sharon had no community organizing experience and she and Malik were a newly established couple. And with enormous grace and spiritual radiance she took on critical organizing roles and held together an odd, ever-expanding commune of people determined to help.Common Ground was founded. Sharon Johnson, my partner, she put up $30. I put up $20. And with that $50, we founded Common Ground.

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ask, "So you’re the anarchists in the mosque brought in by the ex-Black Panther giving free health care?"

"Wah. And we’re environmentalists, too," Bork replied. The next day, the soldier, having done some research, addressed her by her real name.

The medics were followed a few days later by a caravan of doctors, nurses, grief counselors, acupuncturists, and herbalists from San Francisco. On September 11 a French relief organization, Secours Populaire, arrived. When the French physicians accompanied Roger on house calls, they were amazed at people’s poor health. "Chronic illnesses, old untreated injuries, and results of neglect had only been exacerbated by Katrina, not created by it," Roger wrote in What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation. In this regard, New Orleans is merely a microcosm of a healthcare disaster that is happening nationwide.

Word spread and almost overnight health practitioners and political activists arrived in droves. On September 22 with Rita threatening to make landfall, Rahim’s home, By year’s end, a total of one hundred seventy volunteers would have rotated through the clinic, including three dozen locals. Common Ground’s first aid station had become a full-service medical clinic, still a cash-free operation dependent on in-kind donations and volunteers. In traditional medicine, it offered herbalism, massage therapy, and acupuncture.

By early October, the clinic was treating over a hundred drop-ins per day. It also spawned the Latino Health Outreach Project to help migrant workers with health and legal issues. They even made house calls for workers injured on the job.

Scott Weenlein, a tall, slender RN from Quebec who arrived soon after the clinic opened quickly made strategic linkages with what was left of the New Orleans medical community. He says that the clinic reshaped the way he thinks about politics. "Most people think of direct action as taking a street during a demonstration," he says, "but big deal, so you got a street. This is not about taking the streets, it’s about taking health care." SOLIDARITY NOT CHARITY became the clinic’s motto.

During the week that Jonathan was there, the clinic never closed and volunteers slept wall-to-wall on the floor. Intake was thorough and records were meticulously kept. The list of projects and tasks on the wall that needed volunteers included: critical incident debriefing; medical legal support; or covering our heroes; and infusing all we do with anti-oppression intentions.

Jonathan told Michelle Garcia of the Washington Post (Sun, Dec. 4, 2005) that locals such as Swamp Rat Jack, who lives across the street from the clinic, scoured away from the medical facilities with soldiers stationed out front. He preferred to have his asthma checked at home, where he could show off photos of the gators he had shot down in the bayou.

Two years later, the clinic today is a registered 501(c)(3) organization providing primary healthcare, social work, acupuncture, herbalism, prescription assistance, health education, HIV testing, referrals for specialty care, and a mobile unit for Latino health outreach. Thanks to donations from the community, contractors have finished the remodeling of the storefront space begun by volunteers when the clinic moved out of the mosque and beyond “disaster mode.” Antor envisions a larger space in the near future, owned by the clinic itself, and a financial endowment to ensure its sustainability.

Noah Morris, one of the original medics, is chairman of the board, “My vision for this kind of health care is evolving,” Antor says. “The clinic is a laboratory for education, and beyond ‘disaster mode’ Antor envisions a larger space in the near future, owned by the clinic itself, and a financial endowment to ensure its sustainability. Noah Morris, one of the original medics, is chairman of the board, “My vision for this kind of health care is evolving,” Antor says. "The clinic is a laboratory for education, and beyond “disaster mode.”"

For more information on the current status of the clinic, please visit www.cghc.org and click on Health on the Ground progress report September 2007.

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