Healing hands reach out to immigrants
San Diego Union-Tribune - Monday, October 20, 1997
Author: OZZIE ROBERTS

La Maestra Family Clinic is a bit of stability in a sea of needs.

A licensed nonprofit community clinic -- the newest of 23 in the county -- it is in City Heights, where it serves a mostly indigent refugee population that is too poor to pay for medical care.

Hundreds -- mostly children -- each year come to where La Maestra operates in six converted old buildings wedged in the 4100 block of Fairmount Avenue.

The needy come in all colors and hues. They speak the tongues of cultures in such lands as Mexico, Asia, Africa and Europe.

They bring with them all manner of ills: complicated pregnancies, malnutrition, tuberculosis, asthma, high blood pressure, heart disease and more.

But La Maestra's staff, now numbering 24, including a dozen doctors, some of whom have accepted foodstuffs for payment, has helped nearly 20,000 clients. That's since the clinic was transformed from a refugee work training center six years ago.

And if the clinic's doctors can't treat an illness, they try to find doctors and hospitals that can and will.

For many, La Maestra is the last and only resort. Executive director Zara Marselian always keeps that in mind.

"A lot of times we charge people on their ability to pay," she says. "But many have so little money and no insurance whatever. So what are we to do? Turn them away? We can't do that. We have to find a way to help."

Marselian, 37, is descended from WWII-era Yugoslavian immigrants. She speaks several languages, including Italian and Spanish.

And she is extremely sensitive to the problems and needs of families trying to assimilate in a new land.

At 15, she worked as an aide in a learning lab at a Point Loma adult school. Most of the students using the lab were Mexican immigrants.

When she found herself teaching them English and showing them how to find needed resources, Marselian says, she "got hooked on helping to make a difference that way in
people's lives."

Following a five-year career as a teacher and refugee coordinator for the community college district in Washington, D.C., she returned to her native San Diego and led a group of 20 who started La Maestra as a training center. (The name translates to "the teacher."

Marselian also led the later move to create the clinic after center founders heard many health-care-related complaints from students.

"We now see 80 to 100 patients a day," she says. "We're fast becoming a large clinic."

The work has its share of drawbacks for Marselian. Much anxiety is directly related to the clinic's constant need for financial support.

For example, La Maestra depends, greatly, on government-funded medical insurance programs.

For Marselian and her staff, that means they must wrestle with bureaucracies, paperwork, rules and regulations: Regulations such as those requiring the clinic to verify that anyone it seeks to serve, through a government funded program, is in this country legally.

"We do the best we can," she says.

Yet it remains clear that the major emphasis at La Maestra is on the basics -- saving lives, relieving pain, reducing suffering.

Says James Hebert Sr., one of the doctors whose patients paid him with food: "It's a good thing that we do here -- they're all good people who come to us in need."

Caption: 1 PIC
Serving the needy: Zara Marselian is guided by much empathy in her work at La Maestra Family Clinic. JERRY RIFE / Union-Tribune
Edition: 1,2,3
Section: LIFESTYLE
Page: E-1
Column: MAKING IT
Index Terms: HOSPITALS ; MEDICINE ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; POVERTY ; REFUGEES ; BIOG. INTERVIEW. PROFILE.; Zara Marselian ; La Maestra Family Clinic
Record Number: UTS1350072
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