

Center

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"These people were the ones who first told me I had diabetes," she said, "and it came at a real difficult time in my life."

After a work-related accident that inflamed the cartilage of her upper chest, Rohrs was out of work. She drifted in economic limbo — between employment and disability benefits — as she waited for her claims to process with her employers.

"All that time, I didn't have health insurance, no Medicaid, no anything," she said. "I really started to get scared, and I'd think to myself, 'What would I do if something really bad happened?'"

That something did happen.

She began to feel nauseous, her balance and coordination began failing and her inflamed cartilage began to ache more and more each day. Without insurance, the only place she could go was to the center.

"I knew I didn't have the money, but they didn't care. They brought me in, sat me down and told me the truth about diabetes and about arthritis," Rohrs said.

Now, she said, she wouldn't dream of leaving, even though her disability claims have been approved.

Rohrs looked up and smiled at Renee Geller, a nurse at the center, when she walked into the room to take a blood sample.

Geller asked Rohrs how she'd been along with a few minor health questions, helping Rohrs keep her mind off the needle in her arm.

Geller gently pulled the needle from Rohrs' arm and put a cotton ball on the small mark. Rohrs held the cotton ball as Geller prepared to apply a bandage.

After 10 minutes, a doctor came in and stuffed a pink prescription slip into Rohrs' purse, wishing her a nice day.

"This place means so much to me," she said. "It really did save me. Without it, I don't think I would be here today."

On the lookout

Donna Polk was on the telephone in her office, asking the secretary downstairs about the recent death of a client's grandchild.

She said she planned to attend the wake and bring a blanket to the family as a token of friendship and caring.

Friendship and caring, she said, are what being human is all about — a philosophy the executive director of the NUIHC said she used in every facet of her life.

So far, it's worked well, she said.

"We're very involved in the lives of our patients," she said. "We want them to know this is a place they can come to, and not just for health care, but for life care."

Polk has a broad vision for the center. The move to the new building is just the first step, she said.

"I want to make this a one-stop shop in the community," she said. "I want a place where people can get dental care, a place for food stamps, commodity food items, for condoms, even for child care."

Polk envisions a healthy community — where the elderly citizens who don't want to stay home can come and watch over the children of the neighborhood, and where violence and ignorance cannot touch the lives of the young or the old.

And, she said, it starts in this former warehouse on Q Street.

"Our goal here, right now, is to inform the community that we're not here just for urban Indians," Polk said. "We're here for students, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, the young, the old — everyone who needs us."

Break time

Two hours after Rohrs left the center for home, Geller sat in her office, eating something microwaved in a plastic container.

It was only a 10-minute break, but it would possibly be the only one for the day. As the center's site director and a licensed practical nurse, Geller's days are often full.

But Geller said she was happy to be busy. She remembered a time when the center was open for only four hours one day a week.

She remembered having to work in a cramped office with few supplies and obsolete equipment, trying to make the most of what she had.

That time was not quite over, she said, but the load was getting a lot easier.

All of the certified medical personnel at the center are from Saint Elizabeth's, she said, except for people such as herself, who are licensed to give basic health care services and counseling.

The Saint Elizabeth Community Health Center has a contract with the NUIHC, which receives block grants awarded by the federal government to Indian tribes in Nebraska.

"Saint E's gives us our doctors, our nurses, our shots and supplies and things like that," she said. "We're responsible for bringing in the clients and administering the programs."

Programs Geller listed included HIV testing, case management for patients without family doctors, training for student nurses, and education on issues like prenatal care, breast and cervical cancer and nutrition.

Geller said the center's future was bright. She said she looked forward to seeing the clinic and its programs grow.

"I see it outgrowing me," she said. "I'm only an LPN, and I doubt an LPN will be able to head this place in the future."

As her break ended, Geller stood up, stretched and put on her lab coat.

"I love it here," she said. "I've been offered a job that pays \$5,000 more, but it's not about money. It's about helping the people who really need it."

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