

Blue bus of health and happiness rolls around Miami communities

UM's Pediatric Mobile Clinic is back on track serving low-income communities after a donor gives \$650,000 to keep it rolling for the next four years.

By Jon Silman
The Miami Herald

On a rainy Thursday morning, a big blue bus is parked in front of a Kendall library.

Inside, just about every inch is stuffed with medical supplies and beds and stethoscopes. Any leftover space in the bus that serves as a mobile clinic is for doctors, nurses and patients to squeeze by.

Like a hospital, the mobile clinic is chilly and that chill quickly gets more noticeable when 11-year-old Juan Moreno realizes he is about to get an injection.

Juan, in khaki shorts, a red shirt and high top sneakers, has been coming to the clinic for two years with his mother, Hilda Forero, a Colombian immigrant who speaks no English and has no car or health insurance. The pair lives in a room of an apartment owned by a friend.



On this day, Juan is out of school at the mobile pediatric clinic, run by the University of Miami Department of Pediatrics, because he has stomach pains. But Dr. Lisa Gwynn, clinic director, makes a poignant discovery: In addition to treatment, Juan needs a vaccination.

On hearing this, the youngster begins rubbing his left bicep, puts his hands together in prayer and starts smacking the side of his face.

"It's cold in here," he says.

"If it wasn't for this," says Forero, in Spanish, "I don't know what I'd do."

The mobile clinic began in 1992 after Hurricane Andrew, traveling to low income communities serving residents without health insurance.

The clinic staff includes a social worker, rotating medical students and a bus driver. In the library, parents sit around tables to fill out forms while kids play.

"We try to run it like an office," said Gwynn.

The roving clinic provides medical care for patients up to age 21 in Miami-Dade who don't normally have access to medical care.

"We have approximately 2,000 visits per year," Gwynn said.

The county has the highest percentage of uninsured or underinsured residents in Florida, according to a UM study, and 30 percent of children living in the county are below the poverty level.

The clinic "allows the department to assist a number of children in our community who would otherwise not get this level of care," said UM School of Medicine spokesperson Omar Montejo.

The clinic almost closed after Jackson Memorial Hospital, struggling with major budget woes, slashed its funding. It is spared when the Himan Brown Charitable Trust hears about its financial plight.

Brown, a New York philanthropist, was a famous radio producer who worked with Frank Sinatra and Orson Welles. He died in 2010, leaving behind a sizable trust with the stipulation that it be used for charity. In 2006, the trust gave \$1.5 million to the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, according to the Wall Street Journal.

For UM's mobile clinic, trust administrators agree to donate \$650,000 – with the understanding the money be paid out over four years.

On Wednesday, the clinic received its first check .

Gwynn was grateful.

"Tears came to my eyes," she said. "It was a true miracle."

Young Juan is fighting back tears of his own, but for a different reason.

As he is escorted into the cramped vaccination room, he asks that the shot be fast.

"You're going to feel a pinch," says Ryan Mattie, a third-year medical student, dressed in green scrubs.

Juan puts his left hand over his face, waiting.

Then, "holy cow!"

After the pain, Mattie asks him to move his arm.

"See?" he said. "It still works."