



Miracle Worker

In a 32-foot van, Dr. Gloria WilderBrathwaite prescribes desperately needed medicine, compassion, and self-respect to kids.

BARBARA GRAHAM reports on a woman who mobilized herself.

THE SCENE COULD NOT BE more familiar: A well-dressed woman sits beside a 4-year-old with a sore leg as he waits to see the doctor, while in a nearby exam room, another 4-year-old undergoes her annual checkup. The door to the waiting room bursts open and a young woman enters, her 2-year-old son riding her hip. "I think he's got an ear infection. Again," she sighs to the receptionist, who nods sympathetically.

This description could fit almost any pediatrician's office in America, but in this particular office there are some striking differences. For starters, the "office"—including two exam rooms and a nurses station, storage closet, bathroom, waiting area, and receptionist's desk—is squeezed into a bright blue 32-foot van. Instead of

sick patients having to travel to see a doctor, this doctor comes to their neighborhood. Pediatricians' offices are rare in poverty-stricken southeast Washington, D.C., where the mobile unit—officially, the D.C. Children's Health Project, a program of the Children's Health Fund—sets up shop five days a week. Derrick Warren, the receptionist, is also driver, mechanic, and male role model to fatherless children. The boy with the sore leg is a resident of Grandma's House, a home for at-risk children; the woman who accompanies him is not his mother but the home's health care coordinator. Even more notable in this full-payment-at-time-of-service era of medicine is the fact that no money—not even a co-payment—changes hands. Forty percent of the

patients are uninsured and seen free of charge; the rest are covered by Medicaid.

But the most remarkable aspect of life in the big blue van is the spirit of the place, embodied in the energetic, larger-than-life presence of 36-year-old medical director Gloria WilderBrathwaite, M.D. Dr. Gloria, as she's called by everyone, dispenses respect and love along with first-rate health care. And judging from the abundance of hugs exchanged with patients, the affection is mutual. "Love is universal," she says. "It transcends everything if you let it come into your life."

That doesn't mean things are easy in the van. "We see enormous tragedy," Dr.

Gloria says. "We have kids who have never been vaccinated and have diseases you're not supposed to see anymore, kids >

Dr. Gloria in her mobile unit, Washington, D.C.

with HIV who have major complications because of lack of care." There are children whose fathers are on death row, children without shoes or jackets in winter, children of the working poor, and children whose mothers smoke crack. But even the most distressing situation can offer a glimmer of hope, an opportunity for self-respect. "Every mother who puts down her crack pipe and walks her child down the block because that child has an ear infection is inspiring, because on that day, at that time, she is choosing her child above her smoke. I tell her she should commend herself for that," Dr. Gloria says. And though there are frustrating days when the nine-year-old van breaks down and she has to examine kids on tables in a local community center; other days when, instead of treating sick children, she must spend hours fundraising for a new van and operating expenses because the unit, which is entirely dependent on private donations, is perpetually short on money; nights when she cries in her car on the way home because there's so much suffering, Dr. Gloria says there's no place on earth she'd rather work.

"There but for the grace of God..." she says. Coming from a severely impoverished background, she doesn't see this as an idle abstraction. Dr. Gloria grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Her mother, Theresa, worked two—sometimes three—jobs to support the family after Dr. Gloria's father, an abusive alcoholic, left when she was 3½ years old. There were some bad years when there wasn't enough money to put food on the table or heat the house. There were even a couple of years when Theresa worked the graveyard shift as a dispatcher for a cab company, and the three children

spent several nights each week sleeping in the company's office. But Dr. Gloria's mother was "determined to do right by her kids," the doctor says. "She was always a role model, always consistent. She never gave up." It was her mother's strength of character and unwavering faith in her children that gave Dr. Gloria the courage to believe in herself, she tells me.

We're seated at the kitchen table in the spacious new suburban Virginia home she shares with her husband, Carlos, a

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Fairfax County police officer, and their children: Travis, 13, Kai, 7, and Trent, 4. Dr. Gloria looks around the room and grins. Despite the fact that she's a highly respected physician, she still seems a bit surprised by her good fortune. Or maybe it's just plain gratitude—for the many mentors who appeared along her path. There was Duke, the neighborhood grocer who heaped bags full of food on her when all she had was pennies—and handed her a dime as change so she could preserve her dignity in front of the local kids who stood by watching; Mr. Spieve, her high school chorus teacher, who offered support at Brooklyn's then nearly all-white Midwood High School, where she'd been sent because of her high test scores but where she felt conspicuously out of place; and the counselor who taught her

the ropes at Howard University because, as Dr. Gloria puts it, "I had no idea how to do college. No one in my family had ever graduated from high school."

Then there was Joseph Sherman, M.D., who was the first medical director of the D.C. Children's Health Project. Beginning in 1992, Dr. Gloria served as his resident, then as a fellow. When Sherman left in 1997 to work with HIV-positive children in Africa, he recommended her for his job. "I'd never been given such a high honor professionally, and when he did that, it was just like Duke handing me that dime," she recalls. "Joe was saying he respected my ability enough to give me the most cherished thing he had, which was these patients. Ever since, my mission has been to make sure I never disappoint these families."

Dr. Gloria makes a point of sharing her background with her patients, especially those between the ages of 7 and 12—the time, she says, when young people decide whether or not to believe in themselves. "I tell them that when people say things like 'If you work hard, study hard, and make sacrifices, you can really get somewhere,' that's not a lie. It may not be *easy*, but it's not a lie. At some point in your life, you have to be willing to take the garbage that's been handed to you and make something out of it. Only you can decide what that something is."

Alec Thundercloud, M.D., a Native American who is slated to be her fellow for the next two years and who hopes to operate a similar unit on a reservation, says, "Dr. Gloria instills self-esteem in people wherever she goes. She's the model of how I want to practice medicine."

Indeed, Dr. Gloria seems tireless. How, I wonder, can she meet the demands of her professional life, which often extend late into the night—not to mention the claims of her loving but high-energy brood—and still seem so calm, so brimming with joy?

"There are times after one of those late nights that I wake up and groan," she admits. "But as soon as I step into the van and look into the faces of those moms and those kids, well, there's no better shot of coffee in the world."

Barbara Graham is a regular contributor to O. She is at work on a novel.

What You Can Do to Help

To contact the D.C. Children's Health Project, visit www.childrenshealthfund.org/dc.html. The Web site also lists National Children's Health Project Network locations throughout the country. If you can donate your time: Volunteer to help at a local children's hospital. To find the facility nearest you, look in the Yellow Pages or contact the National Association of Children's Hospitals at

www.childrenshospitals.net.

If you prefer to make a cash contribution:

Give to the Children's Health Fund, which serves at-risk children via mobile medical units and school-based clinics. For more information, visit www.childrenshealthfund.org/get_involved.html or call 800-535-7448. Donations can be mailed to Children's Health Fund, 317 E. 54th Street, New York, NY 10021.