

Kirk Watson's Speech for People's Community Clinic Annual Luncheon
5-9-05

Yesterday was Mothers' Day.

My first understanding of what my mother did outside our home was when I was pretty young. Billye Watson was a nurse. And, when I was 4 or 5, maybe even 3, she had a job in a nursing home. She had been hired to bring an underperforming facility up to state standards. Every day, she would take me there, very early in the morning, until it was time for her to take a few minutes away from work and drive me to preschool or kindergarten.

The elderly people in that nursing home loved seeing a little boy. (I was, as I know you suspect, an adorable child.) In any event, it felt like they surrounded me on most mornings while I would sit in the lounge area and try to watch TV. They wanted to talk to me. It scared me. I'd go to be with my mother, which meant I'd follow her as she would check on people in their rooms. I'd see and smell illness.

My mother tried to explain to me what was going on. She described the reason some of the residents seemed to be talking too loud, why they were unable to hear, weren't making sense or seemed so sick.

My mother's nature, her values, helped me understand, very early on, that fear should be replaced by concern, compassion and a desire to help those whose health had changed who they were.

A short time later, my mother became a nurse in a children's hospital. That's the job she had most of my life. I got to see her do her job--or practice her mission--more than most kids do, because I ended up working as an orderly in that hospital (the nepotism rules were far too lax).

Again, her essence, actions and way of touching the patients and their families opened my eyes to the role that wellness, illness and health care played in day to day lives of people and those who love them. Crying, unhappy kids were the norm, as you might expect. Frightened, worried and sometimes angry moms, dads and grandparents were frequent. But, the joy of a good result or a kid walking out of that hospital healthy again could change the feel of the entire place and everyone in it.

Watching Billye Watson address the needs of those she was called to help, reinforced in me that all of these people had dignity, even when they were not really themselves because of their health. It taught me that, who I am, who we are, is in large measure, a result of how much we help others maximize who they can be when they are faced with health challenges that redefine their sense of self and being.

Her values and lessons defined my understanding and feelings about things, but it wasn't until my family faced health issues that the lessons were really illuminated.

For example, I'm supposed to be dead. As many of you know, I'm a cancer survivor. I would be dead, but for access to excellent, early and frequent health care.

I lost Billye Watson to cancer when she was only 62. Daddy died because of cancer 13 months before her, when he was only 66. But, both lived many years fighting that beast because of quality health care.

Each day, Liz, Preston and I address the needs of a great kid who is basically on a life support system, working to control his Type 1 diabetes with at least 4 shots of insulin a day and blood tests that are no less frequent than 8-10 times a day.

I make this personal statement to help us recall that each of us has some understanding of the controlling role that our health and health care plays in living.

It's so simple we sometimes forget a basic, fundamental truth: our health is the single most significant determiner of the quality of our life; the single most important factor in life itself.

Poor health, illness, pain places a shadow over a person's life. Sickness of one family member--even a chronic, controlled sickness--places a shadow over an entire family. It can change the texture and color of life.

I believe most people, if they pause for a moment, innately understand this truth, and share these values as a part of our shared humanity.

And, yet, we live in a time in which far too many of those with whom we share this very human bond have little or no access to health care, and are denied the ability to be as healthy as they can be.

An embarrassing reality is that Texas ranks last in the nation in insurance coverage. Over 28% of Texans under age 65 are uninsured.

More children in Texas are without health insurance than in any other place in the country. Recent cuts in the Children's Health Insurance Program or what we know as CHIP have left approximately 175,000 kids without health insurance.

You saw the jelly beans when you came in. There are 11,000 beans in that jar. Imagine another 15 jars.

In our three county region of Travis, Williamson and Hays Counties, there are 280,000 children and adults without health insurance. That's over a quarter of a million of our immediate neighbors. Consistent with the Texas numbers, that's 1 in 4 people. That's another 25 jars of jelly beans.

How can this be? Why is it we are not addressing such a fundamental issue?

The only reason I've heard is that Texas just went through some tough economic times. And, it has been said, "Texas will do like Texas families do in tough times. We will 'tighten our belt'."

But, I don't know a single Texas family that, when it's faced with difficult financial times, turns to the sick child and says, "Buddy, you have to carry the burden of balancing the checkbook." Who knows any Texas family that would turn to the elderly member of the family and say, "Granny, you have to give up your medicine. Your quality of life is not our priority or problem"?

Particularly, if that family has the resources to provide for the health of its members. The forecast for Texas' gross state product in 2005 is \$924 billion. If Texas were a nation, its economy would rank as the 8th largest in the world.

Yet, in our family, 21% of our children live in poverty. We are 44th in the country in the number of our babies living that way. 29% of our children are not immunized, leaving us 46th in the country. Our family can brag that we're 49th in the nation with a population over 25 without a high school degree.

And, of course, we're dead last for kids without insurance.

Shouldn't we be asking, "Where is the heart of our state?"

When calculating the human cost of that assessment, shouldn't we ask: "are we satisfied?"

For our children, their wellness, and their key to a better, more fulfilling life: "How low are we willing to go?"

By the way, it's bad economics to not take care of the health of our family members. The cuts in Medicaid and CHIP funding in 2003 meant many bad things for our economy. They meant higher local taxes to compensate for the increase in emergency room visits; they meant more costly visits because people were forced to put off seeking health care until a later time; they meant those who could afford health insurance faced increased premiums; and they resulted in the loss of federal dollars. Plus, hospitals are a major employer in our state. They create hundreds of thousands of jobs and over \$85 billion dollars in economic activity. They play a major quality of life role when it comes time to attract business and educated workforce. And, of course, those employed as doctors are being asked to shoulder a larger and larger burden of uncompensated work.

Bankruptcies are increasing because of health care burdens on families. Our small businesses are suffering because of difficulty with providing employees health care. Even General Motors' stock is reduced to junk bond status in part because of its problem addressing health care needs.

We must be smarter about setting our priorities and living up to our values. Our Texas family should be disciplined. But, our discipline should be to take responsibility for and treat our current condition. We have failed the physical. The numbers I've quoted are akin to a battery of bad medical test results.

It's time to show discipline, manage our condition and become healthier as a state. Our current efforts are impractical, incomplete, ineffective and uncaring.

Part of the solution, of course, sits here in this room: the people that support and nurture People's Community Clinic—and have done so for 35 years now. This wonderful place, which is aptly named because of its focus on the people, is a nurturing, loving respite that allows members of our collective family to maintain their physical health. It is a clinic that knows no barriers and erects none. Those 11,000 jelly beans represent 11,000 real human beings that are treated with dignity and asked to share in the responsibility of managing their illnesses and becoming healthier. They are treated from head to toe, from prenatal care to elder care.

People's values people.

But, we've discussed the need. Even with this great resource in our community, hundreds of patients are turned away weekly. People's can and wants to increase its capacity and improve its effectiveness. People's takes justifiable pride in the fact that it constantly refines how it does business and focuses it on improving patient outcomes.

The goal of People's Community Clinic is to increase patient appointment capacity by 20%--6,000 more appointments per year by 2006. It's renovated current space, installed new technologies, implemented a new scheduling system and provides patients with tools for preventing illness and enhancing health.

Most of its funding is from private support. From people like you. It's raised \$41/2 million toward its three year goal of \$10 million. I might add that it is recognition of People's success that the Austin American-Statesman has dedicated proceeds from the Capital 10K to People's for the past two years. And we appreciate that.

You—all of you--have made a difference for our family. We have lots of work to do. But, God bless you for your commitment to this cause. And, God bless People's Community Clinic for caring for our family.

Thank you.

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