

One doctor's commitment to her community

The *miracle* on Main Street

By Jennifer Mellace
Special to the News-Post

Courage, compassion and fortitude have brought Dr. Bonita (Bonnie) J. Portier, D.O., to where she is today.

Recently awarded the Maryland Osteopathic Physician of the Year Award 2006-2007, Portier has devoted her life to medicine and helping others. From this devotion, she has managed to pull together a group of people with the same beliefs, and in December 2005 opened the Emmitsburg Osteopathic Primary Care Center (EOPCC) — a nonprofit dedicated to providing medical education and patient-centered osteopathic healthcare.

Located in downtown Emmitsburg, the goal of EOPCC is to empower the community to improve their health and wellness through education, and to provide services with compassion, integrity and dignity — regardless of a patient's financial situation. And while some may be reluctant to embrace the clinic, others have done so with fervor and refer to it as "The Miracle of Main Street."



Staff photo by Skip Lawrence

Dr. Bonita Portier at her office in Emmitsburg with assistants, from left, Kristin Harbaugh, Sarah Rohrbaugh and Ann Bennett.

The journey of the good doctor

To understand Portier, you

must go back to the beginning. Born and raised in Mansfield, Ohio, she was one of six children. Her folks, both of German

descent, provided a loving but strict household, especially when it came to schoolwork. "All six children would be in the dining room until homework was done," remembers Portier. "They were very strict about that and the work was sternly checked."

While Portier's father was trained in pharmaceuticals, he opted for the more physical labor of steelwork. Her mother, a homemaker, loved science — a passion she instilled in Portier — and dreamed of becoming a nurse.

Unfortunately, the money wasn't there and during the late 1950s recession, Portier's family experienced poverty firsthand. "My dad told me, even when I was in college, to always remember the taste of being poor," says Portier. Remembering his words, she made it her purpose to continually help others, especially those less for-

tunate than her.

In college, Portier studied sociology, education and theology and went on to teach and later meet her husband, Dr. William L. Portier, Ph.D. But at the age of 29 — married with three children — Portier began thinking about a new career, a career that would somehow combine her love of science with her love of people. After much deliberation, she made the choice to enter medical school.

With the support of her husband and young family, Portier embarked on a long journey, one that saw her through 15 years of night school only to be rejected from medical school again and again. At the age of 43, Portier began to wonder if the past 15 years were for naught, when someone spoke some powerful words to her. "A co-worker told me I was stopping myself from being accept-

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Staff photo by Skip Lawrence

Dr. Bonita Portier, right, talks with assistant Kristina Carpenter. Portier was named Maryland Osteopathic Physician of the Year.

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ed into med school," says Portier. "They said there must be something you won't allow. Thinking it through, I realized I was still trying to do it all. So, I let go and allowed my husband to be Mr. Mom. After that, I was accepted."

Her choice, however, wasn't a traditional medical school. While she applied to many, it was West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine that she chose. "They knew I was 43," says Portier. "When I told them I had promised myself I would stop applying to med school when I was 75, I guess they figured they should accept me now."

One of 19 colleges of osteopathic medicine in the United States, WVSOM became Portier's home away from home. Over the next several years, she studied the medicine that was developed 130 years ago by physician A.T. Still. According to the American Osteopathic Association (AOA), osteopathic medicine is one of the fastest growing healthcare professions in the United States and brings a unique philosophy to traditional medicine. They also tell us, that with a strong emphasis on the inter-relationship of the body's nerves, muscles, bones and organs, doctors of osteopathic medicine, or D.O.'s, apply the philosophy of treating the whole person to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness, disease and injury.

While learning this philosophy, Portier clocked countless hours and miles, separated from her husband and children, to fulfill her dream. In 1991, she graduated and, after completing her internship at Pennsylvania's Clarion Hospital in 1992 and her residency in internal medicine at Baltimore's Franklin Square Hospital in 1995, Portier — a general practitioner, board certified in internal medicine — returned to the Frederick area to work with Dr. Alan Carroll in his Emmitsburg family practice.

A fork in the road

Four years later, Portier made another life-altering decision. Eager to provide everyone with quality healthcare, she left Carroll and set-forth on a dif-

ferent journey. "Growing up, my family didn't have healthcare," says Portier. "I know what it's like when people don't respect you. I wanted to build a healthcare center where patients felt like the most important person in the world, regardless of their financial situation. I wanted to empower people to start getting well from the time they walked in."

She did just that. Together, Portier and two friends — women with the same vision as her own — started a nonprofit clinic out of Gettysburg Hospital Health Center in Thurmont. As a teacher, Portier made the decision to educate anyone who wanted to learn about medicine. "I came from a bootstraps family. When we started the clinic, we had no money and just 50 patients. But we did it and slowly grew."

Portier took students, nurse practitioners and whoever else wanted to learn. As the clinic grew, the time came for Portier and her team to relocate. So with the support of her family and friends, she began her search.

"I truly believe divine intervention played a role. I remember saying a little prayer that I just needed a run-down place for \$125,000. Not an hour later, I was coming through Emmitsburg, looked up and there was an old building for sale with an asking price of \$126,000. We offered \$120,000, they agreed and the bank said yes."

Portier purchased the building in 2001, and with the vision and generosity of the late world-class architect Grant A. Cadwallader, and the tremendous work of CMW Group architects and general contractor McCoy Brothers, the first phase of the clinic was under way.

"I had a vision of a bright healing place with high ceilings, wonderful flow and great harmony — the perfect place for people to come and be healed," says Portier. "They made my vision a reality. Today, patients come to us and feel warm and safe."

Gracing the waiting room is a magnificent stained glass window, designed by Elizabeth Grafton of Fayetteville, W.Va.,



Staff photo by Skip Lawrence

Dr. Bonita Portier at her office in Emmitsburg.

and framed and lighted by Roy and Catherine Beverage and Carol Allen. There are also computers in the waiting room, supplied by the Community Foundation of Frederick County.

"The Community Foundation has been very gracious through the years," says Portier. "In addition to the gift of computers, they have also supplied us with an EKG machine and an automatic external defibrillator. A large part of being able to give comes from us not trying to recover the price of these things. They've been a large part of our success."

The Community Foundation has provided grants over the past three years in recognition of the service EOPCC provides to people in the Emmitsburg area. "The EOPCC board of directors identified a need for primary medical care in Emmitsburg and has been working diligently to fill that need," says Betsy Day, president of The Community Foundation. "Access to healthcare is a concern for all communities and EOPCC addresses this concern, has a sound reputation and its staff, including Dr. Portier, is well-respected and highly qualified."

Moving forward

Fundraising efforts continue,

with the most recent event — a wine-tasting Oktoberfest — held in October at Barry and Monika Lucey's Penterra Manor. Using Portier as their primary care physician, the Luceys appreciate how she pays attention to them and how she never turns anyone away. "My husband and I feel strongly about Dr. Portier and her cause and commitment to the community," says Monika Lucey. "This was our first fundraiser for the center and we hope to have more."

Currently undergoing the second phase of EOPCC, Portier hopes to have it complete by December 2008. And while the goals will include the expansion of the educational program and continued commitment to the patients, staff and providers, the structural goal is to complete a comprehensive medical care facility with added space for specialists (with an emphasis on mental health), student housing and meeting areas.

Always looking to improve, serve and heal others, Portier admits she has lived her life in fast forward; yet, she couldn't be happier. "We have so many blessings," she says. "I had an urgency to do the dream and now, our kids are following their own dreams with that same urgency. I can honestly look back and say, we were the luckiest people on the planet."