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Patient Partner

Alumna provides more than health care at free clinic.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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When Bridget McCandless was approached by a friend and fellow doctor to be the medical director at the free clinic he was opening, she told him she'd give him a year. McCandless, BA '88, MD '92, was busy raising her family and running her private practice.

That was 13 years ago, and McCandless is still medical director at the Shared Care Free Clinic in Independence, Mo. The clinic, which focuses on chronic disease management, serves more than 600 low-income, uninsured adults. Of those treated, 68 percent have four or more chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and emphysema, and 72 percent are on six or more medications.

McCandless has been interested in reaching special populations since she was five, when her doctor father

and registered nurse mother would take her to volunteer at a nearby penitentiary and at a domestic violence shelter. When she was in her second year of medical school at Mizzou, she worked at Medigroup, a free clinic in Columbia.



Bridget McCandless performs a checkup on one of her patients at the Shared Free Health Clinic in Independence, Mo. She has been medical director since the clinic opened in 2000. Photo courtesy of Bridget McCandless.

“I have always been committed to social justice,” McCandless says.

“That is what drew me to the Shared Care Free Clinic. The good patients are what kept me there.”

When McCandless works with new doctors and the clinic’s 80 staff volunteers, she stresses the complexities of poverty care and the importance of patience consistency, clear communication and good listening.

“Taking care of a busy person who is an international traveler is different than taking care of a patient who lives in his car,” she says. “Both have incredible challenges. It is the context of the patient that changes the way disease behaves. A one-size-fits-all approach works for no one.”

It’s why McCandless sees patients until 10 p.m. once a week. She understands most of them can’t take time off work for an appointment. She has also worked to make the clinic a one-stop shop where the patients

can get their eye and foot exam, pick up medicines, get vaccines, and participate in diabetes maintenance and smoking cessation classes.

“The personal attention makes it a lot easier for patients to do these hard things we ask them to do,” McCandless says. “I fully expect the patients to walk because it has such profound implications for their health, so everybody gets a pedometer. If they catch me without it, I owe them \$10. So far I’ve never had to pay.”

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