Honoring Dr. Jim Withers of Operation Safety Net  
Celebrating 30 years of “going to the people.”

We’re proud to honor Dr. Jim Withers, the founder and Medical Director of Operation Safety Net at Pittsburgh Mercy, on his 30th anniversary. In this recent interview, we learned about his incredible journey and the lifesaving work that has benefited those who experience homelessness in Pittsburgh and across the world.

How did you get interested in the field of street medicine?  
I grew up going on house calls with my dad, a family practitioner in Hanover, PA. My mom was a nurse, so I had two great role models. After my residency at Mercy Hospital, I stayed on as a faculty member and began to explore the notion of “going to someone else’s reality” – a classroom of the streets, so to speak. I met a homeless man who had started doing social service outreach and learned a lot from him. It was pretty radical; I didn’t tell the hospital what I was doing.

Were you formally trained in street medicine?  
Not at all. When I started medical school, the concept of street medicine was pretty much unknown. There were maybe three or four places in the world – Chile and Toronto, for example – doing anything like it. In the U.S., there was one program in Boston but I wasn’t aware of it. So I kind of invented it and nurtured it here, making the change happen. I called it my “dissident curriculum” because it went against the norms of the existing health care structure. In my desperate attempt to find some humanity, I decided to go to the people, see if I could learn from them, connect with them.

How would you characterize our current health care delivery system?  
While it certainly does a lot of good, the current system is focused on the bottom line and tends to dehumanize both patients and workers. Most of our systems were built to work for a company, not for the people they serve. And that leads to a disconnect, with patients often resenting and distrusting providers, and disparities in access. During my early tenure, I found it soul crushing to see how many people we couldn’t help because of the way the system was structured. I’ll never forget the patient who froze to death after leaving the hospital.

How does your work fit within Pittsburgh Mercy?  
Street medicine is definitely in the spirit of the Sisters of Mercy, who came to Pittsburgh from Ireland in 1843 and became known as “the walking Sisters” for their outreach. Our philosophy is the same. We go to the unsheltered homeless - literally meeting them where they are and connecting with the whole person. So it’s both an old-fashioned idea and revolutionary. But it’s the only way to build trust with these marginalized and vulnerable individuals.

What kinds of changes are you seeing in Pittsburgh’s homeless community? And how has the pandemic affected your work?  
Pittsburgh hasn’t seen the increases happening in many West Coast cities. That’s the good news. On the flip side, we’re seeing younger people and definitely more heroin and fentanyl use. In some ways, COVID hasn’t been that different from the other chronic disasters - overdoses and violence, for example - we deal with every day on the streets. However, the pandemic did result in services like soup kitchens being closed so we had to
Are you optimistic about the future of street medicine?
Absolutely. The growth in this area has been amazing since I co-founded the Street Medicine Institute in 2009 to fill the gap. Today there are street medicine programs in over 122 cities in 29 countries on six continents. And it’s exciting to see the interest from current medical students. We have a street medicine fellowship which is the first in the world and was started in 2019 in collaboration with UPMC Mercy. We also have a month-long rotational program that gives fourth-year residents and nursing students a very hands-on experience, and it currently has a waiting list to get in. A recent program attendee told me, “I got my common sense back this month.” Another exclaimed, “It’s so real.” Many of these students go on to start their own program, having seen first-hand how effective and rewarding our model is.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS AND MAKE AN IMPACT!
Support Operation Safety Net during The Pittsburgh Foundation’s #ONEDAY Critical Needs Alert

On Tuesday, August 9, you can make a big impact in the lives of those who experience homelessness. All gifts to Pittsburgh Mercy during #ONEDAY will support Operation Safety Net, which provides Street Medicine and Outreach, basic needs, shelter services, and rapid rehousing programs for those in need in the Pittsburgh region. Best of all, gifts made that day receive a prorated match from The Pittsburgh Foundation.

Visit www.thepittsburghfoundation/Pittsburghmercy on August 9 between 8 am and 11:59 pm to make your gift.

And help spread the word by sharing our posts in the week leading up to #ONEDAY.

Thank you for your support, which is essential to all of our work.

Give today!

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