

Center of Brotherly Love

Since 1991, the Agape Health Center has brought something new to Vargem Grande in Brazil. Beyond carrying out its mission for patients, it has also become a central point for the cultural life of the city.

By Caterina Ruggiu

Like many Economy of Communion ventures, the Agape Health Center in Vargem Grande, near São Paulo, Brazil, sprang from a small seed. Nestled in the heart of a young medical student, Paula Ponte, in 1991, this seed substantially grew into a health center that has won over the trust and esteem of the local community and state for its dedication to patients and its positive economic and social impact.

What makes this health center different from others? Its philosophy is summed up in its name, “Agape,” or brotherly love.

“I personally experienced the problem of social inequality,” recalls Ponte, “and I often wondered what I could do about it, in terms of health services, which I saw were quite lacking.”

Chiara Lubich’s invitation to create businesses whose profits would alleviate the needs of poor families inspired Ponte, who immediately allocated her \$2,000 inheritance to build a health center in a town whose 30,000 inhabitants lacked suitable health services and specialists.

Soon other professionals—doctors, nurses and pharmacists—left behind activities in their respective cities to engage in this project which, although others considered it idealistic, they deemed well worth the effort. One was Darlene Bonfim, the health center’s current director.

“We commit ourselves to offering more than just a cure to our patients’ medical problems,” says Bonfim, who relocated with her husband and five children to Vargem Grande. “We’re continuously up to date on the latest findings in holistic medicine, which bases itself on the interpersonal relationship between practitioner and patient. This is our primary commitment.”

Beating the Odds

When the center was inaugurated in 1993, patients didn’t exactly rush in, recalls Ponte. The Agape Center had to make a name for itself and overcome the instinctive distrust of those who were not used to visiting a doctor except under extreme circumstances.

“We tried to advertise our presence in the city by carrying out a diabetes information campaign,” explains physician Alberto Lira. “With the sponsorship of a bank, we performed 1,000 glycemia tests in one week and offered medical guidance for the prevention and care of diabetes.”

“We began by listening to our patients, to their needs,” remembers Bonfim. “Even if it seemed to be a waste of time, we soon realized that we had won over their trust by the time the work was done.”

The more than 15,000 patients that the Agape Health Center has welcomed since its opening attest to this method’s success. What initially was only a medical testing center—the greatest need at the time—now offers 17 types of medical services, including diagnostic imaging, ambulatory services, counseling, speech therapy and physical therapy. Out of its 54 employees, more than 30 are clinical specialists, surgeons, pediatricians, gynecologists, cardiologists and dentists.

Widely recognized as a reliable source for health services, the center has also engaged in scientific research. In collaboration with Vargem Grande’s Health Department, the Federal University of San Paulo entrusted the Agape Health Center with researching hepatitis in the local community.

Staff Spirit

“Not everyone on our staff embraces a religious creed, but everyone believes in the human person and his or her inherent value,” states Bonfim. “Our focus on living the Golden Rule—‘Do unto others as you would have them do to you’ (Lk 6:31)—begins among us and then with our patients.”

Day after day, the health center continues to develop, following the guidelines of the Economy of Communion, which for Bonfim doesn’t mean just sharing the profits. “It would be inconsistent to put our profits in common and consider our employees or patients as means to make a profit.”

She recounts how after a physician resigned in order to continue his studies, he later reapplied because, although he had worked in many places, he “missed the respect, honesty and joy found here.”

Bonfim has many of these work experiences to share. “On another occasion, my complaints about the behavior of a rather rude physician led me to ask myself if we had truly loved him,” she states. “I told our team: ‘Every human being has at least 10 good qualities. When we don’t discover these qualities, the problem is not his or hers, but mine.’ We challenged ourselves to discover these qualities in each other. The following month, the doctor told me, ‘I was like a beast, and all of you are making a man out of me.’”

Untiring efforts to build and maintain unity among the staff is what earns “the support of our invisible partner, God’s providence,” confirms Darly Lemes, an administrator. “It has never failed us, but rather has reached us through the generosity of many.” During a moment of financial difficulty, he says, an employee even sold property in order to support ‘her family,’ which is how she considers the staff.

The Agape Cultural Center, the center’s cafeteria and meeting hall, has opened its doors to the city at large, promoting cultural and social programs. A group of artists exhibited their work—with the benefits going to Agape’s patients—and prominent civil authorities attended the city’s first opera there.

In addition to their attentive healthcare in response to the city’s needs, Agape directors are also actively involved in city planning and collaborate on a state project that helps young adults enter the workforce.