



Lisa Tealer, Evelia Chairez and Gloria Brown, of the Bay Area Community Health Advisory Council

PHOTOS: PAUL KITAGAKI JR

A POWERFUL COMMUNITY HEALTH ALLIANCE HELPS WOMEN IN NEED

Several years ago, San Mateo resident Evelia Chairez knew it was time to get her first mammogram, but she had lost her job, she had no health coverage and she could not afford the roughly \$500 cost of a scan without health insurance.

Fortunately, she heard about a free mammogram program through the African American Community Health Advisory Committee (now known as the Bay Area Community Health Advisory Council, or BACHAC), and paid them a visit to see if they could help. A friendly volunteer, Julio Campos, put Evelia in touch with the Community Mammogram Program, a partnership with Mills-Peninsula Medical Center that provides free screenings for underserved women in the county, paid for in part by generous community donors.

“I remember Julio laughed at me for the fiery attitude I came in with,” Evelia recalls now, years after that first encounter. “But he understood exactly where I was coming from, and he made me feel comfortable and helped me get an appointment.”

Evelia is one of thousands of women who have been helped through the Community Mammogram Program—the oldest community health partnership of its kind, running more than 20 years. Originally, mammograms were offered only on Sundays, but clients can now make appointments six days a week.

That first positive encounter led Evelia to begin volunteering at BACHAC. Four years later, she accepted a part-time job with the group—which she’s now held for ten years—because she enjoyed working with the people in the organization and she respected the trusted partnership they had built in the community to help the underserved.

“Evelia feels like a member of the family, as a part of our work and our lives for so long,” explains Gloria Brown, MPA, who is a co-founder of the organization as well as a mentor to Evelia, and a former member of the Mills-Peninsula Hospital Foundation Board of Trustees. “She was always the first to volunteer, giving her personal phone number to clients so they could hear a friendly voice if they needed help. I knew we had to hire her.”

Evelia's path from client to volunteer to employee came at a time when community needs were changing. The Hispanic population in San Mateo County has been growing—it now makes up approximately 25 percent of the population, and for many, English is a second language. Evelia, who speaks fluent Spanish, knows that her ability to help women navigate unfamiliar processes and speak to them in their own language is important. Two other local communities, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, also are often in need of such services.

"Many of the women I help are scared and vulnerable, and it feels good to know that I can help them get the health screenings that can save their lives," Evelia says.

One client in particular comes to mind for Evelia. "This patient knew she needed to get a mammogram, but it was her first time and she didn't know where to turn," she recalls. "I accompanied her to the appointment and she gained so much confidence she has come back several years in a row, delighted that the staff are so nice."

COVID-19 Pandemic Fueled Demand

With shutdowns in services across the board at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, things were slow for BACHAC for a few months, but demand soon came roaring back—and grew exponentially.

"Before the pandemic, we served an average of 100 clients each year with screenings," says Lisa Tealer, executive director of BACHAC. "In 2021, we provided more than 300

Help the Fund-a-Need Program Provide Cancer Screenings

The Women's Health Luncheon & Lecture consistently raises money for critical screening technologies and scans for uninsured and underinsured women. In recent years, generous donors attending the luncheon event have raised close to \$300,000 for Fund-a-Need priorities.

If you would like to help support new MRI technology or the Community Mammogram Program through a gift to Fund-a-Need, please visit sutterhealth.org/mills-luncheon or contact Kathy Hansen at kathy.hansen@sutterhealth.org.



Lisa Tealer, the executive director of BACHAC, first worked with the organization as a volunteer.

EARLY DETECTION IS BEST

80 percent
of breast cancers detected at
Mills-Peninsula Medical Center are
stage 0 or stage 1,
which can lead to better treatment outcomes

mammograms and related exams to women. Beyond screenings, we also saw the need to help organize COVID-19 testing and vaccination education. We also started a Wellness Where You Are program to help with the difficulties encountered by members in our community through the pandemic."

Lisa and her team are committed to bridging the healthcare gap in underserved communities. Their success comes as a result of building trusted partnerships in the community with other nonprofits, as well as churches and schools. They leveraged established relationships to bring even more services and education to the community.

"Lisa has catapulted the organization to another level altogether," Gloria says. "She has an incredible skill set, advocating for COVID-19 testing and

so many other resources needed in the community."

Like Evelia and many others, Lisa started at BACHAC as a volunteer; their long tenures at the organization provide a solid foundation for the community. Gloria says that Evelia's work also set a powerful example for her daughters, recalling that one served as a tutor as a teen, and has returned after college to serve the San Mateo community like her mother.

Evelia says she looks forward to resuming educational programs in person, with larger groups of women who can help encourage each other about the importance of early and regular breast cancer screening. In person, she says, she can see when women might be in more distress and she can help comfort them, as she has done countless times before. ➔

"MANY OF THE WOMEN I HELP ARE SCARED AND VULNERABLE, AND IT FEELS GOOD TO KNOW THAT I CAN HELP THEM GET THE HEALTH SCREENINGS THAT CAN SAVE THEIR LIVES."

—EVELIA CHAIREZ

Free Mammograms for Those in Need

For more information on the Bay Area Community Health Advisory Council free mammogram program, or to make an appointment, call (650) 483-9663.

The Mills-Peninsula Women's Center

The Mills-Peninsula Women's Center is one of the region's foremost providers of comprehensive healthcare for women and a leader in the detection and treatment of breast cancer. The center employs an expert staff specially trained in mammography and ultrasound; it is equipped with the best available technology and was the first in the area to offer all-digital mammography services.

The center recently celebrated one year with automated breast ultrasound (ABUS) technology, which was supported by donors. "Supplemental breast cancer screening with ultrasound has been increasingly used in women with dense breast tissue," says radiologist Kelly C. Broderick, M.D. "ABUS provides high-resolution ultrasound images of all of the breast tissue, and has been proven to detect additional breast cancers that are not visible on other imaging technologies."

The Women's Center serves more than 32,000 patients each year. In 2021, staff at the center performed more than 23,000 mammograms, 8,000 breast ultrasounds, 1,100 breast MRI exams and 1,650 additional diagnostic procedures.

Locally, rates of invasive breast cancer have been 10 to 20 percent higher than the statewide rate, making this an "area of concern" as defined by the Public Health Institute. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of low-income women in our area are also at risk for late detection—their cancers often are not diagnosed until it is too late for the most effective treatments. To address this, the Mills-Peninsula Hospital Foundation is raising money to bring a new 3T Breast MRI to the center, for even more detailed imaging that can serve more patients, more quickly.



(L-R) Dorra Sellami, M.D., Jennifer Leung, M.D., Kelly Broderick, M.D., Diana Baker, M.D., Rahi Kumar, M.D., and Wilbur Wang, M.D., radiologists at Mills-Peninsula Women's Center, are grateful for the advanced technologies that community donors have helped fund.