

A DETERMINED WARRIOR FIGHTING FOR THE CITY'S POOR

Editor's Note: "Heroes of Everyday Life," a series, written by Susan Condon, Review-Journal, on May 6, focuses on notable people in Southern Nevada. The Tuesday issue featured Ruby Duncan, a hero of everyday life, fighting for the city's poor.

It was the late 1960s and life was pretty rough for Ruby Duncan: She was on welfare, struggling to care for seven children between the ages of 5 and 12.

In her attempt to enroll in a job training program so she could get off welfare, she found herself butting her head against the bureaucracy. Federal welfare checks were being reduced, the job training program eliminated.

So Duncan and hundreds of other welfare mothers launched a public campaign for better programs.

The fight was won in a big way — welfare checks were reinstated, job programs put into action. But, according to Duncan, that was simply justice . . . and logic.

Today Duncan is president of Operation Life Community Development Corp., a non-profit medical center providing much-needed care to thousands of Las Vegas' low-income families. Operation Life was a direct offshoot of the protests in the late '60s and the marches of 1971.

Since then, the former welfare mother has served on a presidential commission studying the needs of poor women; she's been an adviser to governors, mayors and legislators; and — perhaps most importantly — in the last two decades she has helped to raise the quality of life for Las Vegas' poor.

But to her the biggest accomplishments of all is the neat, rather unimposing building nestled in a low-income residential area in the city's West Side.

The building is the Operation Life Medical Clinic. Since 1973 it's provided vital medical care and counseling for people who previously fell through the cracks of preventive and critical health care, said Duncan.

One of the best things about Operation Life is its location, she added. She spoke from her office in the medical center, an office whose walls are covered with plaques and proclamations attesting to Duncan's years of social service.

Operation Life is located at 600 W. Owens, between F and G Streets. It is within easy walking distance of hundreds of low-income

families, said Duncan.

"People don't have to wait for a bus for eight hours to go and leave a medical clinic," said Duncan. "They can just walk here. It's in their neighborhood."

Operation Life Medical Clinic is the fruition of a dream held by Duncan and the hundreds of other poor women who marched through Las Vegas streets in 1971, protesting what they considered to be shoddy treatment of welfare mothers.

"We wanted to get away from the welfare rolls, to be our own people," said Duncan. Instead, job training programs were being eliminated. So, with Duncan leading the Las Vegas chapter of the National Welfare Rights Organization, the women took to the streets, marching down the Strip and setting up a protest at McCarran International Airport.

They got their point across — and Duncan caught the

attention of legislators on a local, state and national level.

She used the resulting publicity to solicit funds to open Operation Life.

"This was a pie-in-the-sky dream," she said. "No one believed it could be done. The pains (of getting it off the ground) were hard, but we were willing to do it. It gave me stamina."

Activity at the center revolves, to a large extent, around providing medical care for low-income Las Vegas. On a recent sunny, hot afternoon, the clinic waiting room was jammed with young mothers clutching, rocking and holding infants, some of which appeared to be only days old.

The clinic provides both prenatal and postpartum care, said Duncan, taking a quick walking tour of the facility.

"We see people who usually fall through the cracks," she added. "We don't turn anyone away."

The clinic currently has two fulltime doctors on staff. Prenatal counseling is held several days a week, and clinic customers also receive

nutrition counseling from a nutrition expert, said Duncan.

Even such seemingly routine examinations — such as checkups that are needed for employment or participation in school sports — are important at the clinic. These are just the kinds of exams low-income families often can't afford, said Duncan.

Patients are charged a minimal fee, and bills are usually based on the customer's ability to pay, she said.

"This is a wonderful thing for this community," said Duncan. "This is not just for poor families. It's for senior citizens, for middle-income people, for anyone who comes. We get a mixture of welfare and poor people, and people who can barely afford medical care."

For 10 years, Operation Life was located in the old Cove Hotel. In 1983, the new medical center was opened in a new — and debt free — building.

This was accomplished by a combination of federal grants from the then-Department of Health, Education and Welfare,

monies from the state and other donations, said Duncan.

In all, the clinic cost about \$700,000, she added.

"Poor women are a resource and benefit," said Duncan. "We want to work and we can help people." That philosophy is illustrated by the clinic and by Operation Life's other efforts in helping low-income people "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," she said.

"I didn't even know what a legislator was when we started in '68," said Duncan.

Now, thanks to a knowledge of federal and state funding systems, Operation Life has projects such as a homeowner and drug counseling, she said.

In the homeowner program, Operation Life officials counsel people whose houses are being threatened with foreclosure,

said Duncan.

Operation Life does not hand out mortgage money, she explained, but it will help people reorganize their finances or talk to creditors in an effort to work things out.

In addition, Operation Life coordinates and operates a federal WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program, said Duncan. This program includes nutrition counseling and supplemental food vouchers (which can be redeemed at local grocery stores), help with preparing nutritional food plans and smart shopping hints for people using food stamps, she said.

Operation Life, if it is unable to provide the needed specialized medical help, will also refer patients to the proper doctors through a special agreement with University Medical Center.

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