



Friday 3rd of February 2012

[HOMEPAGE](#)

[About MMM](#)

[Healthcare](#)

[Development](#)

[Spirituality](#)

[Vocation](#)

[Volunteers](#)

[Milestones](#)

[Footprints](#)

[Child Protection](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[SiteMap](#)

Health fair in Virginia

Sister Bernie Kenny drove into Lonesome Pine Airport, in Wise County, Virginia at 4 a.m. She thought she and her team from the Health Wagon would get a headstart setting up the clinics due to open at 6 a.m. in the hangar. But she found people there already. They had been waiting in line since 1.30 a.m.



"It is difficult to believe that for many people in the United States today, health services are so hard to access. 43 million people are without health insurance, which means they cannot access proper health care", she says.

Sister Bernie is a Nurse Practitioner who has worked with the Appalachian people in Virginia since 1978. In her area, 75% of people cannot afford health care. In the Health Wagon, which is partly funded by the Diocese of Richmond, she and her team travel to many mountainous locations regularly. They also hold Health Fairs, sometimes associated with ecumenical church events.

When she was invited over to Mountain City, Tennessee, she saw the services provided by the Remote Area Medical (RAM) Volunteer Corps. She realised that could make a big impact back in Virginia. Together with Stan Brock, who founded Remote Area Medical 16 years ago, she and her co-workers began to mobilise volunteers from across Virginia to help provide vision care, hearing and diabetes tests. These were just some of the services available during an intensive 3-day event. Three congenital heart defects in children were found the first day.

It was a huge feat of co-ordination. Terrific collaboration came from staff of the hospital, the Lions Clubs, the Mountain Empire Older Citizens, the Appalachian Regional Community Head Start, National Guard units and numerous businesses.

The Virginia Dental Association organized 175 volunteers. A year ago, on the first RAM visit to Wise County, 1,888 patients were seen. This year, the number reached 2,074, and many aspects were improved, based on what they had learned from the previous year. Sister Bernie says:

"For me the significance of the event was in seeing the length to which people are willing to go to help one another. So many folks came to me saying 'thank you for inviting me, for allowing me to help so many people.'

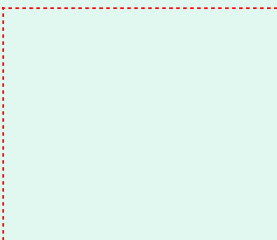
"The spirit was not only for those who received services, but the ones who provided services, and all of the community – the children, the student doctors, nurses, dentists, the churches, the local politicians, the media – all were giving of themselves and knew that they were making a difference in the lives of their brothers and sisters. One young man said to me 'this is the way life should be every day!' It is a mission of mercy and trust – trust in one another that we can pull together and make a difference for one another. Plans are already afoot for next year!"



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Mother Mary Martin

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Commentators were quick to point out, however, that events such as these are also a pointer to the major gaps in the healthcare system, even in many developed countries, and these gaps need to be addressed. Sister Bernie says: 'For many folks it was an eye-opener to realise that there is such a lack of services in our country.'

