

# Unspoken Heroes: The Camino Health Center Auxiliary Story

*More than 30 years and 1,000,000 patient visits later, Camino Health Center's record of success speaks for itself. But it's time to recognize some (mostly) unspoken heroes: The women of the Camino Health Center Auxiliary.*

## **A remarkable group of dedicated, caring women who've raised over \$6 million for the Center.**

As a non-profit devoted to the health care needs of local uninsured and underinsured residents, the Center depends on financial support from the community. In fact, early fundraising efforts consisted of a glass donation jar that sat on the Center's front desk. So just how did an effort that started by collecting spare change grow into a multi-million dollar funding powerhouse? It's a fascinating story of hard work, dedication and vision.

Camino Health Center was originally known as the San Juan Community Clinic. Opened in 1982 by a group of caring, concerned local citizens, the clinic operated from an empty storefront at the St. Vincent De Paul Thrift Shop. Thanks to the efforts of Arthur Birtcher and the first Board of Directors, the Center moved to a larger, more accommodating space and changed its name to South County Community Clinic.

A huge milestone occurred in May 1985 with the establishment of the South County Community Clinic Auxiliary (SCCCA). The Auxiliary was the brainchild of Arthur Birtcher's wife, Gaye. As she quite literally stood at her kitchen sink looking out at the garden, Gaye scoured through her personal address book, the City of San Juan Capistrano Chamber of Commerce Directory, among other sources, looking for (and recruiting) Auxiliary leadership.

The Auxiliary's initial fundraiser was held on September 20, 1985 and raised a record \$13,800. (The group actually promoted its first gathering as the "third annual fundraiser" in order to gain some credibility!) With success still in the air, the Auxiliary presented its first Fashion Show just three months later, in December, 1985. Little did the organizers know that this first fashion gala would grow into one of the premier fundraising events in south Orange County.

In May of 1986, the Auxiliary moved its fundraising mission from San Juan Capistrano to the Meridien Hotel in Newport Beach. With a sold-out crowd and a 100% underwritten event, the group took in an impressive \$64,000 — the most successful fundraiser to date. All in all, the funds raised during the Auxiliary's early years created 49% of the Clinic's operating budget.

*Raising money has always been in fashion.* The Clinic's now-legendary Fashion Shows were originally held at El Adobe Restaurant. But in the third year the event moved to

the Ritz Carlton in Laguna Niguel. Soon, South Coast Plaza began sponsoring the production of the Auxiliary's annual luncheon and fashion show.

A series of spring dinner dances delighted guests during the Auxiliary's formative years. After two years of throwing the event in a restaurant and hotel, the event was moved into private gardens in San Juan Capistrano.

*Gaye Birtcher, founder and cornerstone.* Mrs. Birtcher promised to stay on as President until the organization developed a committed and seasoned membership base. Her tenure as the group's original President stretched five years, at which time Susan Matthews was elected President. As the years went by, Auxiliary leadership passed from one strong leader to the next.

In the meantime, the Clinic had once again outgrown its quarters and moved to a larger building in the same complex. The community stepped in and provided many of the needed building improvements.

*Community Need: A prayer is answered.* Continuing with its strong leadership and community support, in order to accomplish its lofty goals, in 1996, Mr. Birtcher met with Sister Martha Ann Fitzpatrick to request support from St. Joseph Health System, which had purchased Mission Hospital two years before. As luck would have it, the Sisters were deciding where their outreach to the underserved community would be focused. The Mission Hospital Board of Trustees voted to provide financial support as well as in kind support for Camino Health Center.

*A mission supported by Mission.* On October 1, 1996, Mission Hospital began sponsoring Camino Health Center. This partnership has resulted in a multitude of benefits for the patients. Today, as a Federally Qualified Health Center, Camino has support through an affiliation agreement with the hospital. Thousands of families are served each year through its medical clinic, dental clinic, two mobile medical units, behavioral health department and Women, Infants and Children Program. A second clinic is currently being developed in San Clemente.

From humble beginnings with nine founding board members, the Camino Health Center Auxiliary has a growing membership, with over 120 active members. 2015 marks the 30th anniversary of the Camino Health Center Auxiliary and the many achievements of this amazing group of women.