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PEACE & HEALTH

Charles Barber

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BOOK REVIEW

A chronicle of Middletown, Connecticut's Community Health Center from its modest beginnings in the 1970s to its frontline fight against Covid-19 today.

In October 1973, recent college graduate Mark Masselli rolled out a sleeping bag in the cold, dangerous North End of Middletown, Connecticut. For three days he half-slept outside the building at 631 Main St. to ambush the delinquent leasee for the keys to the abandoned Carrie Plumbing & Heating Company, soon to be the neighborhood's Community Health Center. Such was the modest beginning and first location of the CHC, which over the next several decades would evolve from a much-needed independent free clinic providing dental services and sickle cell anemia screenings to a federally qualified health center with numerous locations. Mark, educated in the activism of the 1970s and assisted by proximity to Wesleyan University, was aided by others, including pharmacists, doctors, and community figures who believed in the basic tenet that "healthcare is a right and not a privilege." They would work to bring patient-centered care to overlooked poor, immigrant, and minority citizens. The steady growth of the CHC and the champions behind it are beautifully featured in pages of full-color and black-and-white photos and news clippings as well as sobering early balance sheets. Their battles, including bureaucratic fights with a callous city hall, prepared the CHC to later respond quickly to the Covid-19 pandemic. Barber's book boasts attractive layouts and design, vibrantly presenting a thorough timeline of the CHC, its innovations and expansions, and the development of its internationally recognized research entity, the Weitzman Institute. The story is as much about Masselli as a personality as it is about the clinics he founded, and it effectively captures his devotion to equity in health care through shared missives and regular examples of leadership through listening. Still, the book can be a bit dry and textbooklike in its presentation, which might have been alleviated by more expansive interviews and testimonials. Overall, though, there's a hopefulness in seeing such important services not only surviving, but thriving.

A colorfully presented and encouraging history of an important community institution.

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