

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE

THE WEEK OF JULY 25 - AUGUST 1, 2014

Eugene Cheslock:
Healing and Helping the Community

RETIREMENT TO SOME is a chance to power down and relax a bit. When Eugene Cheslock retired from his medical practice, he just kept going in high gear.

Cheslock, a Little Silver resident, is a founder and president of the Parker Family Health Center on Shrewsbury Avenue in Red Bank. Since the clinic's opening in 2000 – the year he retired – health care professionals, most of whom are volunteers, have seen patients, who are uninsured or under insured, during 120,000 scheduled office visits.

The health center is a cause for which Cheslock never tires of speaking about, never stops raising funds and never stops working to ensure its continued viability and success.

While some may question the need for a free clinic in this day of more readily available health care through the Affordable Care Act, Cheslock is quick to point out that government figures project that by 2022, the nation still will have 30 million uninsured people.

"This issue is not going to go away with time," he said.

A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Cheslock grew up in a "humble home" where he was raised by his grandmother and a stepfather in a three-room apartment in an area that a city map identifies as the border of Bay Ridge and Sunset Park but to Cheslock and his peers was known as "Our Lady of Angels Parish."

Cheslock credits his grandmother and stepfather, who he called mom and dad, with giving him "the gift of higher education and medical school ... It has led me to so many things in my life, all of which are wonderful and good. I consider myself very, very fortunate," he said.

He went to the all-boys, all-scholarship, Jesuit-run Regis High School in Manhattan. "While I didn't excel ... I think the lessons I learned there were lifelong," he said.

He then went onto Fordham University, another Jesuit educational institution. "I commuted from Brooklyn and worked nights," he said. "I worked at Metropolitan Life, doing silly, inane paperwork. I made a few dollars that helped defray costs at the time and then going forward with medical school."

He received his medical degree from the New Jersey College of Medicine and graduated "free of debt, which was huge, considering that my grandmother was a domestic and my stepfather was a government employee.

"When you think about it, to have put me through medical school with that background was a struggle. There was a lot of sacrifice but there was determination by my grandmother to have me succeed," Cheslock said.

The decision to become a doctor – he initially thought he would become a priest – was made while he was in high school when he and fellow students were required to decide the path to follow for their higher education.

While trying to envision his future, his Aunt Mary from Altoona, Pa. took him to the medical school graduation of a cousin. "I was kind of impressed," he said. Another favorite aunt, Aunt Agnes, and his natural mother, were nurses. "So there may have been some medical genes in the family," he said.

He went on to Albany Medical College for his internship and then went into the Navy for two years where he was "assigned to the Marines." One year was spent in Vietnam, the other in San Diego. "It was absolutely one of the proudest sectors of my life to have served with young people who sacrificed or were willing to sacrifice so much for their country," he said.

But, like many of those who served in the military during the Vietnam War, his homecoming was less than welcoming. "It was very confusing for some of us who served to figure out the mood of the nation and understand the anger upon our re-entry to the United States," he said.

As he arrived at the Los Angeles airport from Vietnam, he was spit on and verbal abuse was thrown at him. "It was sad," he said.

After the military, he did a year of residency at the Cleveland Clinic. Unhappy with the program there, he decided to go back to Albany to finish his residency. Shortly before leaving, he met his wife Patricia and during the course of six months carried on a long-distance relationship until they married in January 1970.

The couple had two children, Matthew and Amanda, both of whom live locally, and have presented the Cheslocks with granddaughters.

He became a hematologist because "so many diseases involve the blood system," but he became an oncologist "by default." He was unhappy about the care his grandmother, who was diagnosed with breast cancer, received. "I vowed that I would not ever allow anyone with cancer to be treated that way," he said.

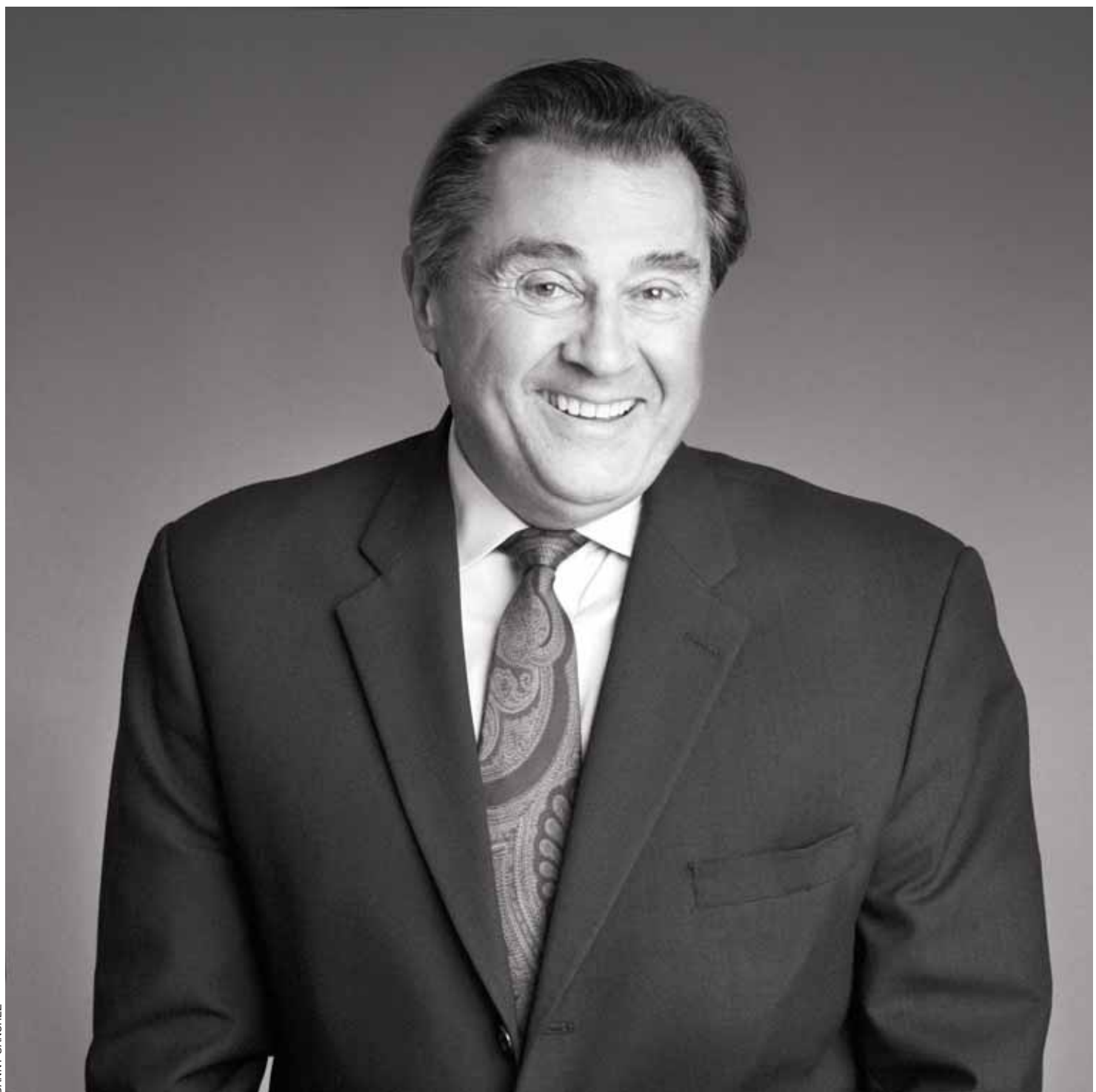
He opened his practice in the area in 1973.

"The experience as an oncologist was so rewarding, despite its intensity," he said.

While he "never regretted" choosing the sub-specialty, it was very draining. Toward the end of 1999, when he was 60, he decided it was time to retire from his practice. "I came home and I said to Patty, 'I just can't do it like the way I used to do it, so I'm just not going to do it anymore.'"

It was about that time that people on Red Bank's west side were looking for assistance from Riverview Medical Center to meet the medical needs of residents who couldn't afford care.

Cheslock heard about the idea from the then head of the Riverview Medical Center Foundation, Mike Driscoll. When asked for his suggestions, Cheslock talked about a free clinic in Hilton Head Island, S.C., called the Volunteers of Medicine (VOM), founded in the mid-1990s by Dr. Jack McConnell, who helped develop Tylenol. VOM was started when McConnell



DANNY SANCHEZ

retired to the island and found that one of every three people there was unable to afford health insurance.

In Red Bank, "an ad hoc committee met at Lunch Break and on July 29, 2000, we opened in a trailer," he said. The first two patients were seen by Dr. John Movelle that day.

"I have to tell you, there was not a lot of warm and fuzzy feeling about this venture around town," Cheslock recalled. "One of the councilpersons said, 'It's good it's in a trailer because you hook it up and haul it away and no one will ever know it was there.'"

Cheslock remembers being invited to a dinner where he got pushback from some area residents who wanted to know why he was involved. "It might bring in people that we don't want in town," he was told.

"My retort was ... 'I see there are renovations being done here... Who does your lawn? Who cuts the greens at your country club? Do you have childcare? An au pair? Is she getting health benefits? ... Who do you think is behind the scenes at the restaurants we eat at in Red Bank?'"

"That was the end of the discussion," Cheslock said.

"No matter who we serve, we are talking about human beings and I think human beings all deserve access to care," he said.

The need for health care for all is essential to the health of the entire community, he said.

While the vast majority of patients were immigrants when the clinic opened, today the majority are American citizens.

Calling the Parker Family Health Center a "great place," Cheslock credits "our great volunteers and our equally fabulous donors" for the enterprise's success.

He has special thanks for "Mr. and Mrs. B," meaning Jon Bon Jovi and his wife Dorothea Bongiovi. The couple has been strong supporters of the clinic since the beginning. They held an event at their Middletown home that raised the capital – "in excess of \$750,000" – which helped purchase half of the 211 Shrewsbury Ave. site where the Parker health center is now located. The other half was donated by Penrose Properties, Cheslock said.

Bon Jovi is again coming to the health center's aid by giving a sold-out benefit concert Thursday, July 31, at the Count Basie Theatre. "This is huge," Cheslock said. "It comes at a time when we are financially struggling."

Part of that struggle is because the health center, which operates at an annual budget of about \$1 million, has expanded services to help its patients deal with legal, housing and other social service issues. Some of those programs were started with grants but, while the funding has dried up, the needs still exist, Cheslock said.

"We are not an 'in your face' organization," he said. "We're very subsurface. We do our deal every day but we aren't sensational."

That fact that the day-to-day work goes on quietly and must be done by professionals with few opportunities for a large contingent of volunteers makes it difficult for the clinic to garner the attention that it sometimes needs to help raise funds, he said.

"Fortunately, we have, in the past few months, attracted about 10 new (volunteer) doctors and nurses, most of whom are subspecialists which is just unbelievable at a time when we are struggling," he said.

Those volunteers are essential for a health center that has only one paid physician, Dr. Gail Reilly, who sees patients and is the administrator/medical director.

The health center cannot charge its patients. "If we do, we lose our federal protection from malpractice," Cheslock said. "That's gigantic but it also limits income.

"That is why we are so damned dependent on the donated dollar," said Cheslock who called the financial situation at Parker "close to dire."

The organization usually is able to raise about \$500,000 to \$550,000 annually – "\$600,000 in an especially good year" – through grants and donations. Large events, like the upcoming Bon Jovi concert, help make up some of the shortfall. The health center is now embarking on a cost-cutting campaign while "trying to salvage our services without sacrificing what we provide to our people. Under discussion has been day closures, staff reduction or heaping more work on the staff," he said.

But while fundraising is a constant struggle, Cheslock is unabashedly proud that "Nobody does it better than Parker from the standpoint of TLC from professionals who give complete care."

But, he cautions, "The Parkers of the world are an endangered species." When Cheslock speaks of the Parker Family Health Center, it is with a palpable sense of pride and gratitude. It is easy to see why the 14-year-old borough institution has become such a huge part of his life.

"These have been 14 of the most glorious years for me personally and us collectively. I often will end a day there with a little enjoiner to the crew: 'Go home and know that you have absolutely made a difference in someone's life today and every day.'"

Those who would like to donate to the Parker Family Health Center may do so by visiting the website at www.parkerfamilyhealthcenter.org.

By Michele J. Kuhn