



A Storm Rallies a Community And Its Partners

BY ED GERARDO and PAM PHILLIPS

During its heyday in the early part of the 20th century, the Norfolk, Virginia, community of East Ocean View was a booming beach destination with bathhouses, a dance hall and an amusement park famous for its roller coaster rides. The community occupied about one square mile of land with neatly planned city blocks on a narrow peninsula at the confluence of the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

By the 1970s, the community's luster had diminished. New access roads, tunnels and bridges had greatly shortened the drive to Virginia Beach and other popular vacation destinations, and by the end of the decade, East Ocean View's amusement park had been eclipsed by the thrill rides at Busch Gardens in Williamsburg.

Years of decline left East Ocean View and its more than 4,500 residents with deepening challenges that included absentee landlords, crowded apartments, poverty, crime, drugs, unemployment and a growing number of properties in decay.

In 2009, Richard J. Statuto, Bon Secours Health System's president and CEO, announced the "Building a Healthy Community" initiative supporting one of Bon Secours' strategic quality plan goals: "Partner with our communities to co-create a more humane world, improve health, and model social justice."

Statuto said, "When we talk about partnerships and broad collaborations, it's not just organizations doing things for people. It's also about creating the environment in which we can collec-

tively solve problems and use assets in our communities to improve the health and quality of life."

Under the healthy community initiative, he explained, each local system would hire an employee with community organizing capabilities and dedicate him or her to a select neighborhood "with high needs, not just health care needs." The Bon Secours organizer would collaborate with community residents and partners to find ways to strengthen the health of that community.

Bon Secours Hampton Roads Health System committed its resources to East Ocean View.

PARTNERSHIPS AND PRIORITIES

In July 2009, leaders from Bon Secours Hampton Roads and the New Life

Christian Center invited East Ocean View residents, civic leaders, landlords, business owners, religious leaders and local government representatives to a summit to get input on how to make the

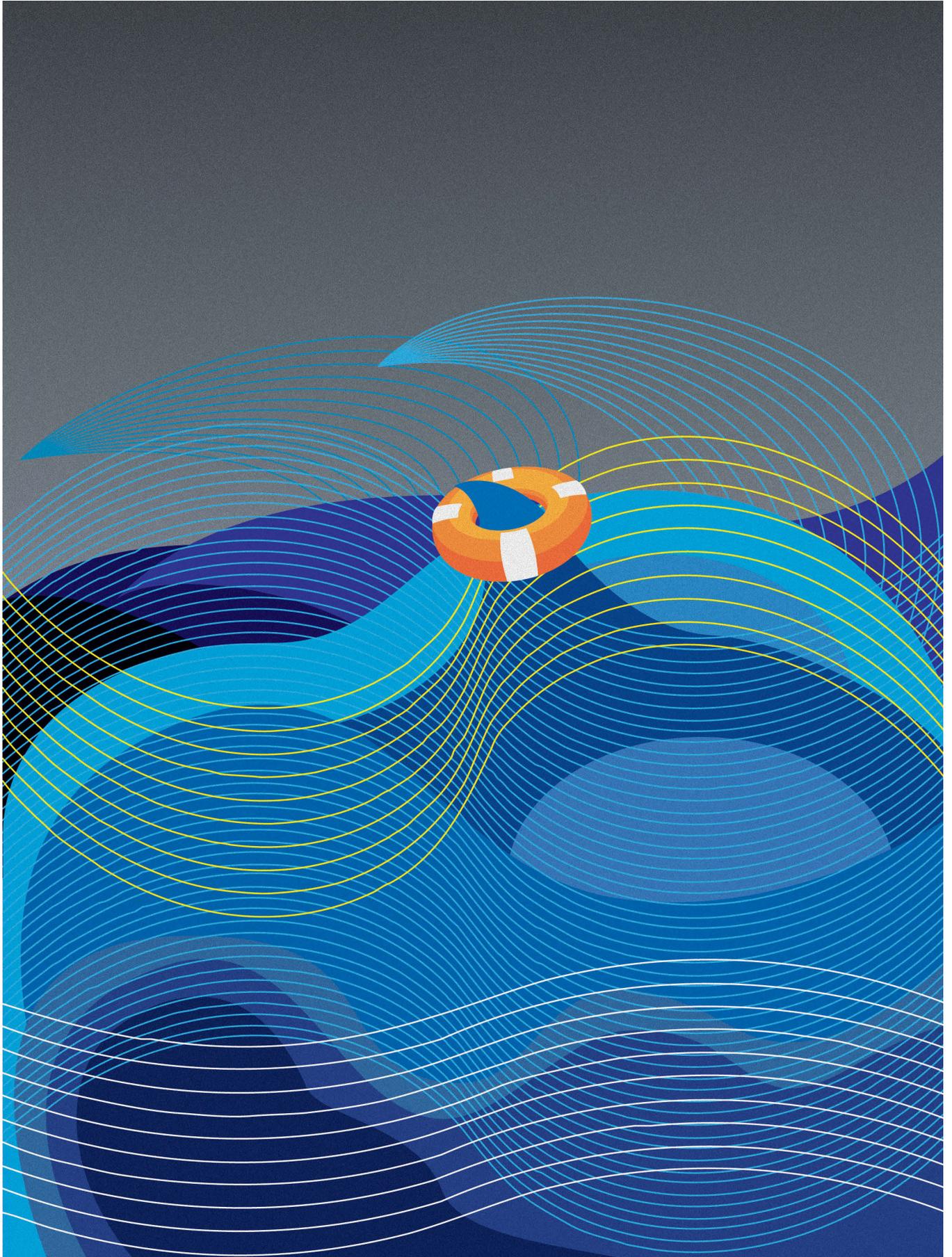
community a better, healthier place. New Life Christian Center is located in East Ocean View, and its two pastors have been informal leaders in the community for the past 25 years.

Despite high rates of hypertension, heart disease, obesity and diabetes, residents did not view "health" as the top priority for their community, opting instead for a cleanup and beautification program. Meanwhile, the summit shed light on two facts: First, wholesome foods were hard to come by in East Ocean View, where the nearest fresh-food market was outside its boundaries; and second, the community lacked primary care services for its poor, uninsured and Medicaid-eligible residents.

Following the summit, plans began to coalesce. "The path was always to

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walk alongside the community in developing goals and action plans,” said Br. Art Caliman, CFX, senior vice president of sponsorship for Bon Secours Hampton Roads. Looking at existing community assets that could use a boost, Bon Secours decided early on to help New Life Christian Center renovate and expand its food pantry, called The Storehouse, which needed more space and equipment to accommodate food donations, including fresh foods. The church opened The Storehouse in 1986 in partnership with the faith-based humanitarian organization Operation Blessing International, which donates about 10,000 pounds of food each month to feed more than 200 needy East Ocean View residents as part of its mission “to demonstrate God’s love by alleviating human need and suffering in the United States and around the world.”

THE PERFECT STORM

Not even four months had passed after the summit when an act of nature changed the course of the Building a Healthy Community initiative.

On Nov. 10, 2009, a storm surge from a three-day nor’easter spawned from Hurricane Ida flooded East Ocean View six times, leaving an already tattered community in shambles. One of many Atlantic coastal communities hit by the storm, East Ocean View made the national news. What happened next drew supporters from near and far.

“I was in Atlanta responding to the flood situation there,” said Jody Gettys, Operation Blessing International’s vice president of U.S. disaster relief and programs. On her return to southeastern Virginia, Gettys met with pastors from New Life Christian Center to assess the impact of floodwaters on The Storehouse.

Not only was the building damaged, all food stores and equipment were a total loss.

“The Storehouse had captured our hearts,” said Gettys. “We wanted to get involved.”

Operation Blessing International and its sponsor, the Christian Broadcasting Network, immediately orchestrated relief efforts in East Ocean View with help from local churches to distribute food to anyone in need. Local restaurants also came to the community’s aid with food and volunteers. Bon Secours DePaul Medical Center in Norfolk brought clothes from its “Clothes Closet,” a hospital service providing gently used clothing for patients, family members and hospital visitors in need, to help residents whose clothes had been ruined. Volunteers came from throughout the

region, including Bon Secours’ three Hampton Roads hospitals.

The Storehouse became a symbol of hope and renewal as Operation Blessing International and Bon Secours worked together to rebuild it, almost doubling its size, within two months. A new design added a better storage and distribution facility, access for the disabled, a deck, a chil-

The storm also rallied residents and organizations and brought renewed vigor to conversations about cleanup and beautification.

dren’s playground and modern appliances to store fresh and frozen foods. On a cold February 2010 afternoon, more than 400 people attended the grand reopening. That day, Operation Blessing International gave away 40,000 pounds of food, and Bon Secours provided health screenings. The reconstruction project provided jobs for five unemployed men, including one homeless man, and three teenagers who also learned new skills.

The storm also rallied residents and organizations and brought renewed vigor to conversations about cleanup and beautification. “It brought unity to our neighborhood,” said Bill Eason, past president of the East Ocean View Civic League.

Bon Secours organized volunteers from a dozen local community organizations to plant 1,000 azaleas, junipers, spirea shrubs, barberry and holly bushes donated by Bennett’s Creek Wholesale Nursery in Suffolk, Virginia. Afterwards, the Norfolk Master Gardeners and others volunteered to water and look after the plantings. The success of this neighbors-helping-neighbors event inspired future cleanup and green-up “block parties,” the first of which, on March 31, 2012, brought out 300 people, including landlords, police officers and local businesses that donated many items.

URBAN RESPITE: THE COMMUNITY GARDEN

The East Ocean View Community Garden is one of the healthy community initiative’s signature projects. It came about when the city of Norfolk donated a parcel of land on a prominent corner in the area. Five growing seasons have passed since the garden came alive in the spring of 2010 and transformed a neglected space into a place of teaching, learning, sharing and bonding with others in friendship.

Some visitors stop by just to smell the flowers. Others, both experienced gardeners and novices,



come to “adopt” space in the raised garden boxes where they use the “square foot” method that allows them to grow more vegetables in smaller spaces. Volunteers come to make meaningful use of their time.

One volunteer, retired Army colonel Rich McKinney, a lifelong gardener, said he enjoys his interactions with visitors, especially youngsters. “Any time I’m in the garden working and a kid wanders in, I will stop what I’m doing and give them the ‘see, smell, touch, taste’ tour,” he said. Children have a particular fondness for the pie-shaped “pizza garden,” which grows some of the ingredients to top a pizza, such as tomatoes, basil and oregano, he said.

Agronomy and agriculture experts from Operation Blessing International masterminded the design of the community garden and brought a wealth of expertise on growing methods they have used successfully in missions worldwide to help end hunger and create small businesses. One unique activity — and a curiosity to visitors — is the solar-powered hydroponic garden, which uses nutrient-enriched water instead of soil and can yield five to 10 times more produce than traditional gardening. The hydroponic garden was Operation Blessing International’s test pilot for similar projects elsewhere in the U.S.

The community garden’s prolific harvest includes tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, lettuce, collard greens, spinach, Swiss chard, strawberries, peaches, grapes and a variety of herbs. Resident gardeners grow for themselves, but they also share with others, particularly those in need.

PRIMARY CARE COMES TO EAST OCEAN VIEW

When the healthy community initiative got underway in 2009, East Ocean View had no health centers where uninsured and Medicaid-ineligible residents could go for basic services. Starting in November 2010, Bon Secours dispatched its mobile health unit — the Bon Secours Care-a-Van — to East Ocean View in partnership with the neighborhood’s Lighthouse Community Church. Twice a month, the unit parks on church grounds, and clinical staff evaluate and treat patients with acute illnesses and chronic conditions. They refer patients to specialists when needed. From November 2010 to November 2014, the mobile health unit saw 17 or 18 patients per day. More than half its patients have at least one chronic medical condition.

In 2013, the Ocean View Medical and Dental Center opened, offering residents affordable pri-

mary care, a pharmacy, diagnostic tests and services covering family health, women’s health, dental care and social work. This public health service is provided through the nonprofit Hampton Roads Community Health Center (HRCHC), another partner in the healthy community initiative. HRCHC and Bon Secours currently are working on bringing obstetrical services to the Ocean View Medical and Dental Center.

PASSPORT TO HEALTH: MAKING IT FUN

By 2013, the time was right to introduce another signature program — a health education program that would be effective and engaging. With this in mind, Passport to Health was developed with help from a local chef, fresh-food market owners and exercise specialists, with the goal of making East Ocean View one of the healthiest communities in southeastern Virginia — one family at a time.

Once enrolled in Passport to Health, a free program, participating families agree to make “healthy decisions” over the course of six months as they attend biweekly classes held at New Life Christian Center. At the end of each class, they receive a box of produce with complimentary, easy-to-prepare recipes. One of the highlights of this program is a monthly cooking demonstration conducted by a local chef who also is a nutritionist and fitness expert.

ABOUT BON SECOURS HEALTH SYSTEM

Incorporated in 1984, Bon Secours Health System originated in Baltimore, Maryland, following the arrival of three Sisters of Bon Secours in 1881 who came from France to care for the city’s sick. They established their first hospital in Baltimore in 1919. Today, the health system’s 24,000 employees and caregivers provide good help in 10 communities within eight local systems in six states. Facilities and services include 19 acute-care hospitals (10 owned, nine joint ventured); one psychiatric hospital; six nursing care facilities; four assisted living facilities; six retirement communities/senior housing; and 14 home care and hospice providers.

Bon Secours Hampton Roads Health System, part of Bon Secours Health System, serves a metropolitan region in southeastern Virginia covering Norfolk, Newport News, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach. Hampton Roads is known for its large military presence, shipyards, coal piers, waterfront property and beaches, all of which contribute to the diversity and stability of the region’s economy.

“We start with assessing the current health of our participants by checking their cholesterol, glucose, eating habits, weight and other factors,” said JoAnne Merinar, Bon Secours’ health and wellness coordinator. “And we’re making a difference,” she added, noting that programs held in 2013 and 2014 graduated 34 families; and a third program, running March to September 2015, is in progress with 42 families enrolled, comprising 110 people ranging from children to seniors.

Another Passport to Health highlight is participants’ access to exercise programs such as Zumba dance and aerobics classes held at the East Ocean View Recreation Center. Contests and challenges bump up the fun factor as families compete against one another for a reward. A walking contest, for example, could result in new walking shoes for the

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family logging the most steps on their pedometers. In addition to giveaways that encourage exercise, participants have received everything from T-shirts and water bottles to smoothie makers and fitness activity trackers.

“After six months, we assess the participants’ health again and compare test results with those from six months earlier,” Merinar said. “Our results have been so positive... We hope that this encourages others to make changes in their lives to get healthier because there is no substitute for being healthy and active.”

Laura Rush, a graduate of the Passport to Health class of 2014, affirmed, “When we saw a change in our blood pressure, it made us want to do more.” Together, she and husband Kenaniah lost 35 pounds in six months, a healthy total weight loss for them. “All of the different facts we learned really made the difference,” said Kenaniah Rush. “We don’t even drink soda anymore, just a lot more water. Our 2-year-old son is learning how to eat healthy so when he gets older, he will not be part of the childhood obesity statistic.”

BENEFITS MULTIPLY

The relationships and partnerships generated through the healthy community initiative in East Ocean View have led to continuing conversations,

binding friendships and partnerships and new projects. Here are a few of the outcomes:

The overwhelming success of The Storehouse’s grand reopening inspired several events, including the “Compassion” events of 2011 and 2013. Compassion 2013 served more than 200 families (665 people) with 10,000 pounds of free groceries, hot meals and health screenings.

In 2014, the community garden became the venue for a spring strawberry festival, summer watermelon festival, and fall apple and pumpkin festival. Health screenings were free, and festival-goers got to enjoy fruit smoothies and popcorn, entertainment and cooking demos. They also had the opportunity to buy low-cost fresh produce from three participating garden markets, receive free samples and pick up some healthy recipes.

The healthy community initiative has reinforced the benefits of existing programs, such as those offered through the East Ocean View Beach Athletic Association, a nonprofit, faith-based youth organization emphasizing academics, athletics, faith, discipline, respect and self-esteem. The healthy community initiative also has helped the organization through contributions, including meals and school supplies, to benefit up to 200 youth who are paired with mentors for encouragement and to help them develop good character.

In another mentorship program, about a dozen retired businessmen and professionals from East Beach, an adjoining, upscale community, formed a partnership with New Life Christian Center to help jobless men better themselves. Under the tutelage, 31 men have learned such skills as how to conduct themselves during a job interview, how to dress for success and more. Some have landed jobs or internships.

The joint collaboration of Bon Secours and Operation Blessing International led to a program developed to empower inner-city youth. Launched in East Ocean View in 2011, “Future CEOs” helps business-minded students develop entrepreneurial skills by starting a business using the Internet. Several graduates of this program have gone on to college; one started a music company; and another, at age 17, established her own eBay store that helps support her and a young daughter. The “Future CEOs” program has been successfully replicated elsewhere, including in a Bon Secours community in the Bronx, New York.

Conversations continue to propel the community forward. In 2012, an East Ocean View Coor-



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dinating Committee formed to address common causes at the local and Norfolk City Council level. The committee includes Bon Secours, the East Ocean View Civic League, Norfolk’s Neighbors Building Neighborhoods program, Operation Blessing International and the U.S. Navy. In addition, outreach activities to engage the Hispanic community and to improve landlord-tenant relations are in various stages of discussion and planning. These partners include Neighbors Building Neighborhoods, Ocean View Medical and Dental Center, Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing

Authority, and a local restaurant.

The projects and partnerships arising from the Building a Healthy Community initiative have generated substantial engagement of community organizations, groups and individuals with considerable success based on sharing the vision of improving the health of the community.

“While more remains to be done to address the many social determinants of health in East Ocean View,” said Br. Caliman, “the many successes of the past several years demonstrate what can be accomplished when a community and committed partners work together to achieve what none of us could have done alone.”

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