

# BizTucson

SPECIAL REPORT 2016

THE REGION'S BUSINESS MAGAZINE

## El Rio Community Health Center



**EL RIO**  
COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER



# National Model of Healthcare for All

## 'Your Health is Our Passion'

By Mary Minor Davis

El Rio Community Health Center opened in 1970 – thanks to the tireless efforts of a few impassioned community advocates, the vision of the founding dean of the University of Arizona College of Medicine and federal funding from President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" to provide healthcare for the underserved and uninsured.

Today, El Rio is a national model for innovative, personalized, high-quality healthcare. El Rio has grown from the "health center of last resort" into the health center of choice for over 92,000 patients at 11 campuses across the city. These centers offer patients one-stop healthcare with medical, dental, laboratory, X-ray, pharmacy and other services available at a single location with a focus on patient wellness and quality of life.

El Rio now has an annual budget of \$124 million, a staff of 1,100 and is primed for even greater growth. It's accredited by The Joint Commission, NCQA Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH) and recognized as the

25th largest community health center in the nation.

"Back then, we were a place for people who didn't have money," said Nancy Johnson, CEO of El Rio. "Today we offer comprehensive and compassionate care for all ages and stages of life" – from infants, children and young parents to employees, executives and retirees. Eighty-four percent of El Rio's patients have some sort of private health care coverage.

### Challenges before success

El Rio's rise to success has not been without its challenges. In 1987, the healthcare system was facing bankruptcy, owing more than \$22 million to creditors, said El Rio CFO Celia Hightower.

"I walked in to an environment where the staff was very distrustful of management and were not engaged in the organization, because they didn't feel it was going to survive."

Within a year, Hightower turned the organization around and it netted a positive \$165,000 in revenue. The

recovery involved cutting staff pay and benefits, and negotiating with creditors, including a \$6 million balance with St. Mary's hospital.

"It was a hard team to lead, but (former CEO) Robert Gomez and I appealed to the mission and why we were here," she said. "The employees started to change and they decided to stay with us."

That was a pivotal milestone. "Robert Gomez really turned this organization around," said Brenda Goldsmith, executive director of the El Rio Health Center Foundation. He was a visionary, a positive force for two decades.

### Patient-centered innovations

El Rio's trajectory into a national role model is the result of several factors – not the least of which is the passionate and committed staff, some of whom have been at El Rio for more than 45 years.

"We have the most loyal, compassionate staff," Johnson said proudly. "They are always trying to answer the questions 'How can we provide better





El Rio leadership team from left – Richard Spaulding, Strategic Planner & Facilities Director; Celia Hightower, CFO; Robert Thompson, CIO; Nancy Johnson, CEO; Dr. Douglas J. Spegman, CCO; Brenda Goldsmith, ED, El Rio Foundation

## “It’s really the healthcare that you’ve always wanted.”

– Nancy Johnson, CEO, El Rio Community Health Center

healthcare to our community and how do we help people feel as passionate about their wellness as we are?”

Patient-centered innovations and initiatives have led to impressive results treating asthma and diabetes, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis; increasing immunization rates; and reducing hospital visits. Aspiring medical and dental professionals travel from all over the country and as far away as Saudi Arabia and Japan to train at El Rio.

Forming partnerships with the University of Arizona College of Medicine, A.T. Still University, New York University’s Lutheran Medical Center, Pima Medical Institute and others led El Rio to become one of the top teaching health centers in the nation for pediatric, medical, pharmaceutical and dental residents from around the world.

Over the years, the list of services has grown dramatically. From pediatrics to clinical pharmacists, primary care to urgent care, dental care to midwifery services, Special Immunology Associates to OB/GYN and Associates. El

Rio has ten clinical campuses, including a freestanding birthing center, pharmacies, lab and X-ray services and Health Builders programs for patients and staffs.

Impressive to be sure, but Johnson said the real focus of all of this growth has always been about providing the best care possible for its patients, and to always be looking for innovative ways to provide that quality care as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible.

### Expanding to new locations

Much of El Rio’s approach has focused on better understanding what community and external factors play into a patient’s decision to act – or not – on managing their health. While some might presume a language barrier, El Rio staff found more critical factors to be education, lack of transportation, time constraints to make wellness visits, multiple-site travel to get labs or screenings and lifestyle choices.

“In truth, most of what affects patient health happens outside of the exam

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## El Rio at a Glance

### By The Numbers

- Patients enrolled – **92,000+**
- Annual patient visits – **340,000**
- Babies delivered – **1,850+ annually**
- Patients with health coverage – **84 percent**
- Staff – **1,100**
- Languages spoken by staff – **25**
- Annual budget – **\$124 million**
- Annual charity care – **\$12-\$14 million**
- Year founded – **1970**
- Number of campuses – **11**  
(10 clinical sites & administration)

### Mission

Improving the health of our community through comprehensive, accessible, affordable, quality, compassionate care

### Vision

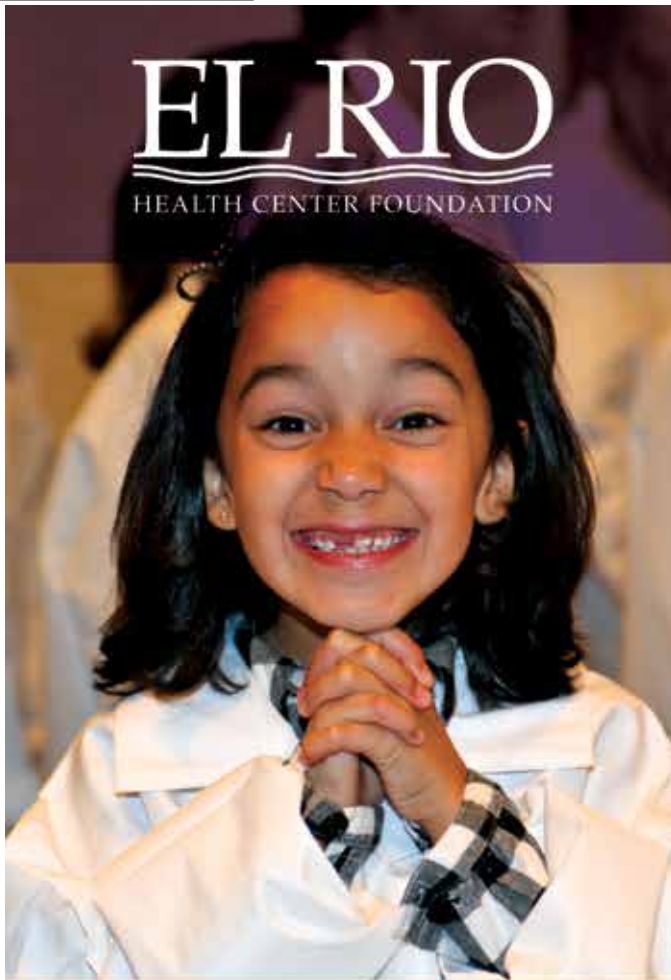
To be a national model of excellent healthcare

### Cultural Beliefs

- Honor Patients –  
“I always put the patient first.”
- Create Tomorrow –  
“I embrace effective change and seek innovative solutions.”
- Step Up –  
“I am accountable for making El Rio a world-class health center.”
- Break Boundaries –  
“I work with others to achieve success.”
- I Matter –  
“I make a difference by voicing my opinion and knowing I am heard.”
- Value Health –  
“I take time for my own health to promote yours.”

### Key organizational results

- World-class experience for patients and staff
- Healthier patients and employees
- Positive operating margin



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room,” Johnson said.

Removing those barriers led to the adoption of several initiatives in recent years. Johnson said when she joined El Rio in 2009 as COO, her boss CEO Kathy Byrne was launching a quality program that focused on understanding patient needs beyond treating symptoms. Focus groups, patient surveys and simple one-on-one interaction between physicians and patients led to a number of initiatives that challenge traditional healthcare approaches.

Under Byrne’s leadership, El Rio expanded the number of health center locations, strategically placed in the community to meet the needs of the underserved where there was a shortage of quality healthcare access.

In 2006, El Rio completed its conversion to a digital patient records system. According to Chief Information Officer Bob Thompson, that “changed the way medicine is practiced. Once you had that data, you could now look at trends in patient health. The convergence of technology and having access to patient trends here and through other health centers around the country has led to population health management.”

**Patient-centered team of providers**

Another advance has been the development of the Patient Centered Medical Home model. The model organizes patient care activities around a team of participants involved in various aspects of a patient’s

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# Healthcare For All Ages & Stages

## Spectrum of El Rio Services

- Primary Care
- Pediatrics
- Family Medicine
- Internal Medicine
- Behavioral Health
- OB/GYN
- Midwifery
- Dentistry
- Pharmacy
- Laboratory
- Radiology
- 24/7 Nurse Triage
- Patient Navigation

## El Rio Programs of Excellence

- Asthma
- Diabetes
- Hepatitis C
- HIV/AIDS
- Pain Management
- Prenatal Care
- Wellness





Miguel Rojas, Board Member,  
El Rio Community Health Center

PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

## Roots of El Rio

In the late 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a "War on Poverty" and the concept of neighborhood health centers was born.

Against this national backdrop, local advocates on the west and south sides of Tucson were building new communities in the barrios and fighting for basic services including healthcare.

At the same time, the founding dean of the new College Of Medicine at the University of Arizona – Dr. Merlin DuVal – wanted a new way to train young medical students and saw that a neighborhood health center would provide that opportunity while serving the healthcare needs of the underserved. He enlisted the help of Dr. Herb Abrams who had already worked with a community in Chicago to build one of the first centers there. Abrams connected with local leaders in the barrios and enlisted their support.

However, at that time residents of the barrios were distrustful – fresh from the loss of Barrio Libre after city officials voted to demolish the neighborhood for urban renewal and build the Tucson Convention Center. They feared a new health center would lead to more displacement of residents. Through tireless efforts of many activists, like Miguel Rojas, and community leaders, the residents were convinced that a health center would be of help.

With the donation of a building by Pima County and \$50,000 for renovations, along with a federal grant, the first El Rio neighborhood health center opened in October of 1970 with a small staff of health professionals offering primary medical and dental care.

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Watch a video  
about El Rio at  
[www.elrio.org/about-us](http://www.elrio.org/about-us).

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care.

The primary goal of these changes was to standardize and increase the quality of care. A nurse for much of her career, Johnson said, "It's been fascinating for me to watch traditional medical models become interdisciplinary with so many people working with the patient." The team may include community health advisors who help navigate patients through their care, physicians, clinical pharmacists, behavioral health specialists, dentists and RNs coordinating care plans.

By adopting new healthcare models and changing systems and simplifying processes, El Rio broke down the barriers that inhibit a patient's ability to access the necessary resources to manage and improve their health.

Johnson said El Rio facilities themselves are designed to focus more on health than medicine. The state-of-the-art building on Congress Street – completed in 2014 – offers cooking classes, Zumba and other fitness programs, as well as a public café in partnership with the YWCA offering healthy cuisine, giving it more of a health center feeling than a medical center.

"It's really the healthcare that you've always wanted," she said. "If we don't take care of everyone in the community, we don't prosper as a community."

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**Thank You!**

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▲ Dr. Greg LaChance, El Rio's Dental Director  
PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

◀ Dr. Andrew Arthur, El Rio's Medical Director in Pediatrics  
PHOTO: BRENT G. MATHIS

# Healthcare Teams for One-Stop Pediatric Care

## Nurturing Early Wellness Habits

By Mary Minor Davis

Dr. Andrew Arthur, medical director in pediatrics, cites one of El Rio's six cultural beliefs as his motivation each day – "Create Tomorrow."

For him, that means focusing his efforts to introduce innovative ways to build early wellness habits – one child at a time.

"We've been looking at ways to provide better pediatric care since I came here," he said. "Parents generally want to do what's best for their child. We're always developing new ways to remove the barriers and help them to do that."

When Arthur joined the El Rio Community Health Center team in 1992, the immunization rate for toddlers was at a dismal 30 percent. Over the next three years, the organization put new practices in place that helped increase rates to more than 80 percent.

Arthur attributes this turnaround to several innovative approaches.

### Understanding patient challenges

"First, we changed our focus to a patient-centered approach," he said. "We were operating on what was convenient for us and not understanding the challenges patients had in making and keeping wellness visits."

Through patient communication and focus groups, Arthur said they identified transportation limitations, work schedule issues and the time it takes to bring children in for wellness visits and vaccines. His team did a "top-down" look at how appointments were scheduled, and how they could maximize the patient's time during the visit and offer rewards for children who maintained their wellness and vaccine schedules.

"One of the first things we did is open the immunization clinic and told parents, 'You don't have to have an appointment for a physical to get your vaccine.' Time off from work, for example, was creating a barrier to people coming in."

Arthur said better record-keeping, training, a reminder call system, and reward programs have all worked together to make a difference.

"When our patients saw that we were adapting to meet their needs, they started seeking out other services because we were meeting those needs – so our well visits went up. Patients' schedules were being respected."

### Introducing 'Reach Out & Read'

In 2000, El Rio launched the Reach Out and Read program – only the second healthcare organization to do so at



the time. Beginning at six months of age, children receive a new book at every visit, which Arthur said has changed the character of a well-child visit.

"It really encourages positive interaction, not only with the doctor, but also between parents and children," he said. "Research has shown that children who are read to at an early age, and who are encouraged to read at an early age, are likely to do better at learning words before they start school."

Children receive books until the age of 5. Arthur said they currently give out about 10,000 books a year. "That costs us about \$150 per child, – that's less than the cost of a single vaccine." A small price to pay for a healthier generation, he said.

The El Rio health center also implemented the VIP program, where the pediatric patient – starting at six months of age – receives a "Very Important Person" certificate in the mail following their visit, addressed personally to them, congratulating them on getting their vaccination or seeing their doctor.

In 2001, following an Inner-City Asthma Intervention Study conducted by Dr. Wayne Morgan at the University of Arizona, El Rio decided to take a look at how they could improve the quality of life for its pediatric patients. Under the leadership of Dr. Paul Enright, a pulmonologist, and Dr. Uwe Manthei, an asthma and immunology specialist, El Rio launched its innovative asthma program.

### **Improving quality of life for asthma patients**

Patients receive two to three hours of individualized instruction on how to care for their condition, and parents receive education on how to manage their child's condition. Children are seen several times in the first year after diagnosis to monitor and record improvement.

"We've seen incredible results," Arthur said. "Children with asthma suffer from not being able to play normally, they miss school because of illness, have trouble sleeping through the night, among other limitations. With this program, we've seen a 60-80 percent improvement in kids now being able to do these things, miss less school, as well as a reduction in rescue medication use and emergency visits. So we've eliminated two-thirds of these problems."

This success attracted the attention

of other programs around the nation, and El Rio became involved with a number of studies that identified this program's intervention practices as a model for other health centers, Arthur said.

When El Rio received its certification as a Patient Centered Medical Home model, which provides multiple specialty members around patient care – Arthur joined with Dr. Greg LaChance, dental director, to integrate dental services during the well visit.

### **Integrating pediatrics and dental care**

"I started working on this about eight years ago," LaChance said. "One of the first things we looked at was measuring if pediatric patients had seen a dentist within a year of their wellness visit. We found out we were only reaching about 30 percent of the patients. Most community dental programs serve about 70 percent youth."

LaChance said better training and hiring of dentists to work with pediatric dentistry, along with adding dental hygienists to the patient care team, increased the ratio of youth to adult patients to around 50 percent. He said he would like to push that to at least 60 percent.

Looking ahead, LaChance said El Rio is working towards full integration – having everyone on the care team participate in a patient visit. They expanded the exam rooms on the main floor of the Congress Street health center to accommodate dental hygienists, who already see pediatric patients for cleanings. Soon patients will visit their primary care doctor, the dentist and even the clinical pharmacist should medication be a factor – all in a single visit.

"We used to have many appointments," Arthur said. "Now we're working towards just having one appointment, where all of a patient's needs can be addressed."

"It takes a leap of faith on our part to let people bring their children into the immunization clinic for their vaccines without a well-child visit, or to allow our specially trained nursing staff to administer asthma care," Arthur said.

This evolving healthcare process provides more efficient care through a team approach that connects patients to needed services in one visit – and produces impressive results. **Biz**

## Patient-Friendly Healthcare

By Mary Minor Davis

Jeff Nordensson has a lot of experience with healthcare – as a patient and as a marketer for healthcare businesses, including hospitals, medical groups and health plans. He's seen the evolution from both the patient and provider point of view.

"In my personal experience, El Rio has always kept the patients as their primary focus. That's an extraordinarily difficult task, especially these days, and I'm amazed at how well they do it."

Nordensson, communications director for Pima County, changed his primary care to El Rio Community Health Center about a year ago. "I've gotten more off-hour phone calls from my current primary care physician asking how I was doing than I had gotten ever from my last PCP."

"If you need care, you get it – rather than having to fight the system," he said. "It's kind of like getting every green light when you're going down Speedway."

## Newcomer Discovers El Rio

By Mary Minor Davis

When Cynthia Jones moved to Tucson in 2014, it was the second move in four years. Looking for a new primary care physician was daunting, "Tucson is very spread out so starting the new doctor search can be frustrating and exhausting," she said.

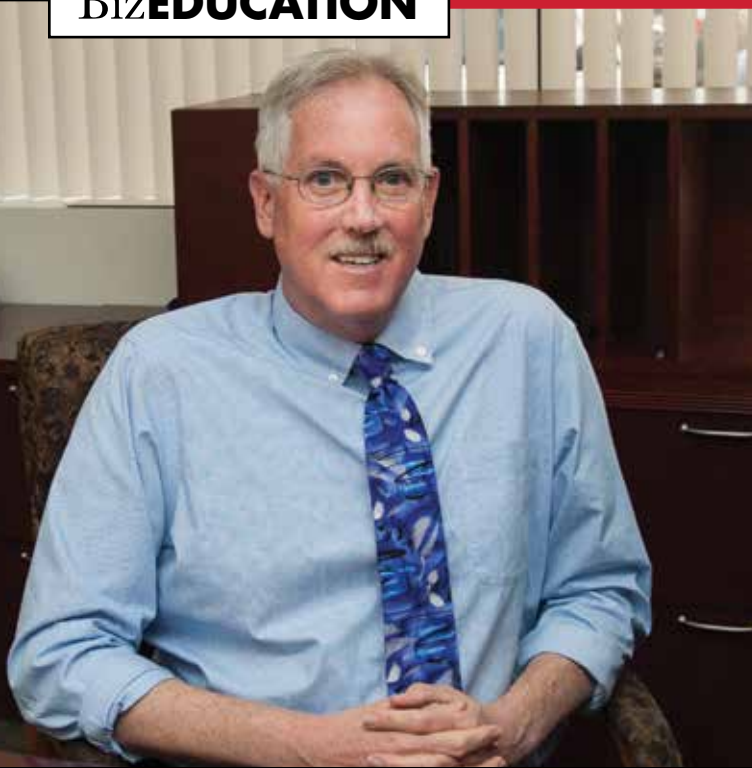
"I had not been to a community health center before. Since El Rio had caught my eye at different locations, I looked online to see what it was all about."

Jones scheduled an appointment at the Congress center. There her doctor took the time to get to know her and helped her with everything she needed, Jones said. She was able to get lab work at the same location during her visit and scheduled other services as well.

"All of the employees were welcoming and friendly, really loving their jobs. I haven't been at an El Rio facility that wasn't this way."

A district manager for Wells Fargo, Jones shared her experience with co-workers who were surprised that she chose El Rio.

"El Rio is a hidden secret. El Rio needs to be spotlighted for the healthcare they can provide to the whole community."



Left – Dr. Douglas J. Spegman, El Rio's Chief Clinical Officer Top & bottom right – A.T. Still University, El Rio Teaching Classroom

# Training Healthcare Leaders of Tomorrow

## Through Collaborations Nationwide

By Mary Minor Davis

Since its inception in 1970, El Rio Community Health Center has been closely linked to innovations in medical education.

Dr. Herb Abrams, the first director of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine, was instrumental in the founding of El Rio. From the beginning he fostered a relationship with the college that gave young doctors in training an opportunity to have a hands-on experience in community-based healthcare.

Today El Rio Community Health Center is helping to create a new model of medical education in what is known

as a Teaching Health Center. This concept emphasizes multidisciplinary, inter-professional educational opportunities within community health centers. This allows students and residents with a passion for community medicine to obtain their training directly within the community health center environment.

El Rio provides direct training programs for medical and dental students as well as residency training in family medicine, clinical pharmacy, general dentistry and pediatric dentistry.

Dr. Doug Spegman, El Rio's chief clinical officer, said "These residencies provide traditional clinical training in acute and chronic care management

and also emphasize preventive care and wellness. This includes a comprehensive approach to understanding healthcare disparities and social determinants to health that are often overlooked barriers to care and patient wellness."

This education experience emphasizes a team-based approach to healthcare that involves community health advisors, patient communications specialists, registered nurse care coordinators, transitions of care coordinators, integrated behavioral health consultants and clinical pharmacists – all working together with the provider team to deliver a comprehensive health home experience.

PHOTOS: CHRIS MOONEY



"El Rio has always been committed to innovation," he said, and is nationally recognized.

"In terms of patient safety, we were one of the first out-patient systems in Southern Arizona to obtain Joint Commission Accreditation," he said. El Rio also has received the Level 3 National Committee for Quality Assurance for Patient-Centered Medical Home designation, the highest level awarded. In addition, El Rio also was recently recognized as a Healthcare Equality Index Leader by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

"This drive towards innovation carries over into El Rio's current efforts in training healthcare leaders of tomorrow," he said.

Spegman has been part of El Rio for more than 20 years. He came to Tucson after finishing residency training in internal medicine in Baltimore, as part of the National Health Service Loan Repayment Program.

"I was really drawn to the community health center movement. I was inspired by its beginnings as part of the war on poverty and overcoming healthcare disparities and inequities – all trying to answer the question of how do you deliver care that reaches every part of the community?"

Spegman oversees more than 170 healthcare providers on the El Rio staff. "We touch the lives of one out of every eight people in Tucson through either our medical or dental services," he said.

### **Hands-on experience in community health**

Over the past 15 years, Spegman has seen the shortage of primary care physicians become an increasingly greater challenge in healthcare. Now demand is growing even higher with the passage of the Affordable Care Act and recent changes in Medicare and Medicaid that give even more people access to healthcare coverage, he said. In addition, traditional medical training is hospital based and centered on curing illness, not on keeping the patient healthy.

So how do you build a workforce that is focused on community health and patient centered care?

Enter A.T. Still University – the nation's first osteopathic medical school. It was founded in 1892 in Kirksville, Missouri, by Andrew Taylor Still.

Working with A.T. Still University in

collaboration with the National Association of Community Health Centers, El Rio became part of an innovative consortium of community health centers across the nation that created a medical school devoted to training primary care physicians within community health center environments. ATSU-School of Osteopathic Medicine Arizona opened in 2007 in Mesa.

The first year students take classes on the Mesa campus. In years two through four, their training is at one of 10 community health centers across the country.

Each year 10 students matriculate onto the El Rio campus and are taught by El Rio faculty members in both classroom and clinic settings.

“El Rio  
is on an  
intentional  
journey  
to create  
tomorrow.”

– Dr. Douglas J. Spegman  
Chief Clinical Officer  
El Rio Community Health Center

Spegman said, "Not only do the students get really good, rigorous medical training, but also an understanding of population health and an appreciation of the socio-economic determinants of health that create barriers to wellness and care. They are trained in motivational interviewing, patient goal setting and community health assessments."

### **Virtual Community Health Center**

One innovative component of the curriculum is the Virtual Community Health Center. Throughout their training students participate in computer simulations where they practice their diagnostic skills with virtual patients. These are composites drawn from patient data registries kept by community

health centers across the nation and compiled by the Bureau of Primary Healthcare in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

From this database, representative virtual families have been created of all races and ethnicities with diseases that are frequently found in those populations. Students are presented patients in a virtual exam room setting and work through various clinical scenarios.

"These scenarios are set up to not only test clinical knowledge but also awareness of social determinants of health," Spegman said. "If you ignore barriers to health, it doesn't matter how correct the diagnosis is – because the patient can't access the care, afford the care or follow through with the plan until you understand and acknowledge that barrier and do something about it."

Another innovative collaboration involves the Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the National Association of Community Health Centers which partnered in 2013 to create community health center based residencies in family medicine.

El Rio was among community health centers in six states to launch this consortium, funded by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, known as HRSA. El Rio currently has 12 family medicine residents in the program.

Unlike traditional residency programs that are hospital based, the El Rio residency is primarily centered on out-patient community health center training and experiences.

"This is an exciting way for community health centers to grow their own workforce and train the primary care leaders of tomorrow," Spegman said. "The proof in the pudding is that in our first graduating class, three of four residents have signed a contract for employment with us. This is true validation of this approach."

### **Post Graduate Dental Residency**

"Equally exciting are the innovations in dental education that El Rio has been involved with," Spegman said.

In 1998, El Rio joined with another innovator of training programs – NYU Lutheran Medical Center's Dental Residency program, a "dental institution without walls." Advanced Education

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Above – Marisa Rowen, El Rio Associate Pharmacy Director of Clinical Services PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

Right – El Rio Community Health Center Pharmacy. Pictured are members of El Rio Congress pharmacy team.  
PHOTO COURTESY RANDOMLYFE MEDIA

# Clinical Pharmacists Help Improve Patient Health

## Managing Diabetes, Other Complex Conditions

By Mary Minor Davis

In 2000, the state of Arizona passed legislation that allowed collaborative practices where clinical pharmacists are able to prescribe or modify a patient's medication plan for chronic diseases under the supervision of a primary care provider.

This was a turning point in healthcare – and El Rio Community Health Center was the first site in the state approved to introduce the clinical pharmacy program thanks to the support of El Rio physicians.

"This was innovation in healthcare, without a doubt," said Marisa Rowen, associate pharmacy director for El Rio. "This not only enabled the clinical pharmacist to be integrated into the primary care team, it also expanded the comprehensive approach to well-being

that focuses on a patient's medication.

"A physician's education is disease-based – what symptoms do you have? Pharmacists go to school and we see that same problem list, but our minds are asking 'what medications could be contributing to this?' As the medication expert on the team, we bring a new dynamic, a strength in our knowledge of medications."

Rowen said the underlying philosophy of clinical pharmacy is "less product, more service." That means looking at a patient's medications over time to see if there are opportunities to address wellness without adding more medications.

The clinical pharmacy program is particularly successful with patients who have diabetes or are taking multi-

ple medications. "Diabetes comes with other issues – obesity, hypertension. You need to look at patients who have diabetes with a holistic approach," Rowen said.

Clinical pharmacists meet with patients for a comprehensive consultation. "Behavioral interviewing has been key in helping build our success, listening to our patients, finding out what they know about diabetes – and more importantly – defining what successful diabetes management looks like," Rowen said.

Local and national studies have shown statistically significant improvement in blood sugar levels, blood pressure and cholesterol through the clinical pharmacy diabetes approach.

In the program, pharmacists meet

PHOTOS: CHRIS MOONEY



“As the medication expert on the team, we bring a new dynamic, a strength in our knowledge of medications.”

– Marisa Rowen  
Associate Director  
El Rio Community Health Center  
Pharmacy

with patients and provide comprehensive treatment-based customized drug regimens. The program involves:

- Ongoing, direct consultation between the patient and clinical pharmacist
- Integrated treatment of diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol
- Education that helps patients learn how to proactively manage their health.

Rowen illustrated the benefits with a story about a patient who had been dealing with diabetes for many years. When he came in for his first comprehensive visit, he showed the pharmacist a letter confirming his appointment to have his foot amputated.

“The pharmacist asked if he’d been checking his feet, regularly. The man said he knew he had ulcers – but his job required him to be on his feet all day. He didn’t check them regularly,” she said.

The pharmacist explained the importance of elevating his feet, cutting back on salt to reduce swelling, and taught the patient that when diabetes isn’t controlled, high sugar levels make it harder to heal.

Over the course of the next three months, the care team was

able to help the patient get his sugars under control, the ulcers completely healed and he “still has both of his feet,” Rowen said with a smile.

Poly-pharmacy – prescribing multiple medications to a patient – is another issue that is a huge priority for the clinical pharmacy, particularly with Medicare patients.

Once El Rio completed its transition to electronic health records in 2006, it enhanced the clinical pharmacist’s ability to provide greater coordinated care. For example, Rowen said they’ll look at a patient’s record and if they see medications that can cause side effects such as diarrhea and nausea, and they also are seeing medications for stomach issues, they will try to find out if there is a correlation between the two and if something else can be prescribed.

“Medication reconciliation is important. If you’re in health-care that should be a priority,” she said. “That is the message we teach all of our students – pharmacy, nursing, medical assistants. If providers see prescription lists growing and growing and growing, it should be a red flag and the pharmacist should be calling the provider who is prescribing all that medication.

Over the past year, Rowen said the pharmacy department embarked upon education within El Rio – meeting with the business department, patient communications and other team members to explain the role of the clinical pharmacist. This has helped us break boundaries and be more successful, she said. As these departments better understand the pharmacists’ role, they can share that knowledge with our patients.

“It’s been a really great marriage,” she said. “We all recognize how we complement each other and honor our patients. The best part are the patients – and how we’ve been able to help them.”

**Biz**



## El Rio Offers Comprehensive Women’s Healthcare

By Mary Minor Davis

El Rio Community Health Center offers comprehensive women’s healthcare for all ages – extending from midwifery and natural childbirth options to well-woman healthcare and menopause counseling.

For more than four decades, El Rio has provided prenatal, childbirth and gynecological care for women at all ages and stages of their reproductive cycles.

Families can choose from nurse-midwifery services at Southern Arizona’s only freestanding birth center in one of the home-like birthing rooms – or the option of delivering at Tucson Medical Center with a mid-wife or an OB/GYN doctor. El Rio’s certified nurse midwives specialize in natural childbirth, but also support women through all pain relief options available to them.

Couples also can choose to participate in the Centering Pregnancy program. This multifaceted model of prenatal care integrates three components of care – health assessment, education and support in a group setting. Couples with similar due dates are grouped together and over the course of 10 sessions learn about pre- and post-partum care for baby, and the parent(s).

For women past the family-planning stages of life, the El Rio offers comprehensive well-woman healthcare, including:

- Preventative gynecology, health screening and annual exams
- Breast exams and referral for breast imaging such as mammograms
- Family planning and contraception
- Emergency contraception
- Pap smears
- Treatment of common gynecological problems such as vaginitis and urinary tract infections
- Sexually transmitted disease testing, treatment and prevention.
- Partner treatment for STDs
- Menstrual cycle problems
- Sexual health
- Mid-life and menopause care

For new patients, a care team will meet with patients to determine individual needs and goals and a care plan will be customized to meet health goals.

To learn more, visit [www.elrio.org/patient-services](http://www.elrio.org/patient-services).

PHOTO: ROBIN STANCLIFFE

# Q&A with Nancy Johnson

CEO

El Rio Community Health Center

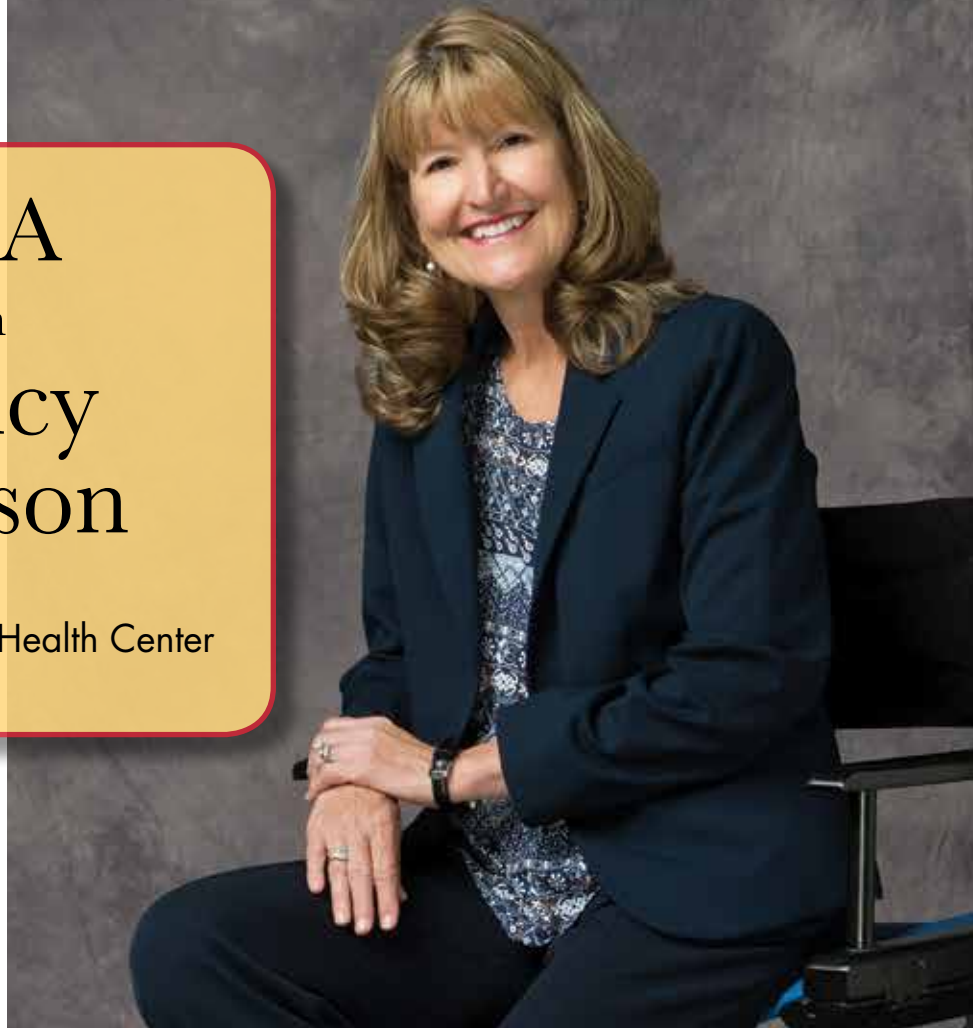


PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

By Mary Minor Davis

It was the summer of 1982. Nancy Johnson was on vacation in Tucson and decided to stop in at the University of Arizona College of Nursing. As a nurse who had recently earned her master's degree and was teaching at Illinois Wesleyan University, she was curious about the UA program. To her surprise, the secretary asked her, "Would you like to see the dean? We're hiring."

**Q.** *When did you first start to think about community healthcare as a focus of your work?*

**A.** When I first started out as a nurse, I worked in critical care, as many nurses do. I just remember seeing so many patients who were so very ill. I realized that so much of health is created in the community. That's why I

wanted to move to the community care setting.

**Q.** *What do you bring to the leadership culture at El Rio?*

**A.** As we've started to build new models of care, we've removed the department silo mentality. People feel open to expressing their ideas and we're able to say "Let's try that

"There I was in my typical summer vacation attire – shorts, t-shirt and flip flops," she said, laughing at the memory. "I got the job – and that's how I came to Tucson."

In 2009, Johnson joined El Rio as the COO, and served as interim CEO after Kathy Byrne retired in July. She was officially named CEO in October 2015.

instead of..." I have a very special team here at El Rio, and many of our leadership team as well as employees throughout the organization have been here for years.

**Q.** *What guides and motivates the team at El Rio?*

**A.** One of the things we've been working with our board on for the past several years is the development of the organizational culture.

We are working hard to create an organization where our patients would refer everyone to us as a great place for care, and our employees would do the same. At the same time, we wanted to pull on our rich sense of mission and vision of who we are. We went through a process with senior leaders who have been here for a while, as well as employees, to help develop our six cultural beliefs – Step Up, Break Boundaries, Value Health, Honor Patients, Create Tomorrow



and I Matter.

They help guide our actions every day and speak to us creating experiences for our patients and for each other in the organization. For example, a couple of years ago if you asked someone in IT what they do for the organization they might have answered, 'I work on computers.' Today they would answer, 'I help provide a world-class experience for our patients by providing connectivity and information to help better care for our patients.' So it's bringing everyone around to our key results whether they engage with the patient or not.

**Q.** *What are some of the opportunities for El Rio as you look forward?*

**A.** We have very good outcomes in terms of health indicators. El Rio offers an integrated healthcare model that includes an array of services, quality care and support from the healthcare team. As the healthcare system moves into cost reimbursement based on health outcomes and cost savings, El Rio is already providing outcomes that indicate we are the best place in Tucson to receive your primary care. With all of the data we have, we see an opportunity to start to tailor services to further meet the needs of our patients. If you're a healthy patient, we'll focus on wellness, education and activities. If you have a medical condition, such as hypertension, we can provide you information on low-salt diets, track your medical visits and tests. If you are a high-risk patient with multiple needs, we will connect you with the full service patient care team.

We also see opportunities with rapid advancements using more technology, such as e-consultations and telemedicine. We are already offering tele-dermatology.

We will pursue more partnerships in the community with other providers and hospital systems. One thing we're talking about is creating an Innovation Center where we share ideas with others in the community, talk about best practices and their results. This not only gives people the opportunity to learn more about El Rio, but brings us together to work on improving our community. All ships rise with a healthier community.

**Biz**



PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

## El Rio Moves Headquarters Downtown

By Mary Minor Davis

El Rio Community Health Center made a major investment to expand its downtown presence with the purchase of the historic Manning House and construction of an adjacent three-story companion building.

El Rio CEO Nancy Johnson said that architects Frank Mascia and Grant Getz of CDG Architects designed a state-of-the-art facility that blends well with the historic architecture of the Manning House which was built in 1907.

El Rio invested more than \$11 million to purchase and create the campus as the administrative hub for its network of 11 centers throughout the city. Including the new addition, El Rio will occupy nearly 72,000 square feet of space at the site at 450 W. Paseo Redondo, near West Congress Street and North Granada Avenue.

"We are committed to the preservation of an important historic building and to the revitalization of downtown," Johnson said.

The Manning House, which El Rio acquired in 2013, will house business offices, including administration, human resources, accounting, wellness, the Pima Community Access Program and the El Rio Health Center Foundation. Johnson said funds from the foundation are helping to cover preservation costs.

Manning 2, the new building which will be adjacent to the Man-

ning House, will serve as the home for patient communications, information technology, facilities, diagnostic laboratory and a new wellness center.

"This will be the heartbeat of El Rio," said Brenda Goldsmith, executive director of the foundation. "We can easily get to any other campus within 15 minutes."

Johnson said there will be approximately 250 employees at the Manning site, which sits on slightly more than five acres. She sees this as an opportunity to showcase El Rio downtown and beyond. She said El Rio already has become a sponsor of the popular Meet Me at Maynards downtown events.

"This is a great opportunity to model behavior to our patients, employees and the community," she said.

At a recent topping out ceremony, Regina Romero, Tucson City Council representative for Ward 1 where the new campus is located, praised El Rio for its long-standing commitment to providing quality healthcare to the community.

"El Rio is an example of how people in Tucson organize to create what we need," she said. "This is the history of El Rio. They have never deviated from their mission to serve all members of the community. We're excited to see this growth in the city."

**Biz**

# Q&A with Brenda Goldsmith

Executive Director  
El Rio Health Center Foundation

By Mary Minor Davis



PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

Brenda Goldsmith loves her job. As the executive director of the El Rio Health Center Foundation, she is responsible for raising money to help people improve the quality of their lives. What's more, she gets to work with people who care about that mission – not only fellow employees but also the board, volunteers, donors and sponsors who support what El Rio stands for. “We have donors for life,” she said. “We care about them and they care about us. There’s a mutual respect.”

**Q.** *What did you do before coming to El Rio? What attracted you to El Rio?*

**A.** I've been at El Rio for 12 years. Prior to that, I worked as development director for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Tucson. Although this was my first introduction to healthcare, it was tied to family and youth development – so there was a synergy there.

What drew me here was the reflection that if you don't have access to healthcare, especially young children, then it will affect your

whole development and quality of life. At the time I arrived, El Rio was serving 25,000 kids. I was excited and overwhelmed at the same time. I saw there were just so many needs.

**Q.** *What were some of the challenges and opportunities you faced early on?*

**A.** The foundation was just 18 months old – a “startup” – inside a thriving nonprofit with decades of history of doing things no one knew about in the community. They were a

new board and there was little private fundraising taking place. We expanded the board, adding charismatic people who were more familiar with El Rio and had a passion for the community.

**Q.** *Is it common for community health centers to have a foundation?*

**A.** No. We're one of only a handful of community health centers with a foundation. We've become a resource for other community health centers that are looking to start a foundation. They look at our infrastructure, our operating model. I am regularly advising other health centers around the country.

**Q.** *Describe the growth of the foundation.*

**A.** We had humble beginnings. There was just me and one other person. Today, we're a staff of five that has raised more than \$17 million with the help of our board and donors. We raise on average from \$1.2 to \$1.5 million annually.

**Q.** *What do you think has been the key to that success?*

**A.** Certainly the board – and the vision of our senior leadership. Robert Gomez (former El Rio CEO) was brilliant in making this a community health center that anyone can come to. His big-picture vision, his advocacy at the state and federal levels to expand Medicaid, and his diversifying El Rio's revenue streams and accepting private insurance were all innovative measures that helped us

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Raytheon Missile Systems

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### **Frank Valenzuela \***

Executive Director, Community  
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“For many, many years, El Rio Community Health Center and Pima Medical Institute have provided mutually beneficial services for one another. As a result, the community at large comes out the true winner. Why does PMI choose to make corporate contributions to El Rio Foundation? Because Pima Medical Institute and El Rio share a vision and mission.”

– Fred Freedman, President & CEO, Pima Medical Institute

*continued from page 161*

## Training Healthcare Leaders of Tomorrow cont.

in General Dentistry offers postgraduate residency programs for dentists in community settings. Stegman said, “Initially, El Rio had two students, but that has since grown to five general dental residents and 12 pediatric dental residents each year.”

The partnership with A.T. Still University also grew. In 2003, it started the Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health in Mesa, the first dental school in Arizona.

“These residency programs have been a win-win situation,” said Dr. Greg LaChance, El Rio Dental Director. “Patients get more service, residents gain experience and training and El Rio can provide cost-effective care for patients. At the same time, it’s a great recruitment tool.” Over the past 12 years, LaChance said he’s hired nearly 40 AEGD residents.

## Creating tomorrow

Looking ahead, Spegman said El Rio is considering a nurse practitioner residency program.

“There currently are very few residency programs for advanced practice nurse practitioners – and yet the need is great,” he said. “Advanced practice practitioners are an important part of the primary care workforce of tomorrow. Currently, nearly all start in clinical practice without the residency experiences like physicians have, which allows for practical training time to hone and refine clinical skills.

“What is truly exciting about El Rio is that we are on an intentional journey to create tomorrow by educating the healthcare leaders needed for the future of our community.”

**Biz**

\* Board Officers

www.BizTucson.com

# Q&A with Kathryn Beatty

Board Chair  
El Rio Community Health Center

By Mary Minor Davis



PHOTO: CHRIS MOONEY

Kathryn Beatty is the newly elected chair of the board of directors for El Rio Community Health Center, serving a two-year term. She and her husband have been El Rio patients for the past two decades. She's now retired from Raytheon Missile Systems.

**Q.** *One of the strengths of El Rio is its focus on innovation in healthcare. What does that phrase mean to you as the new president of the El Rio's health center board of directors? How do you see your ability to be innovative as a board member?*

**A.** As a member of this community since 1978, I have seen the population growth and the changing geographic needs for health-

care. It is clear to me that the health of the community and the need for quality service, convenience and advocacy is forever changing. The combined experience of the El Rio Community Health Center board includes clinicians, business professionals and community servants, all contributing ideas that result in innovative initiatives. My job will be to lead this remarkable team of innovators.

**Q.** *What challenges and opportunities lie ahead for El Rio over the next 5 to 10 years?*

**A.** The challenges and opportunities are extensive. With the shrinking availability of locally owned, not-for-profit healthcare services in Tucson, El Rio recognizes that we must be competitive and accessible to the entire community. This means we must make El Rio a world-class health center. We must form and maintain community partnerships to further enhance health education in the community. We must provide outreach and showcase the full spectrum of services that we offer. Our patients have the benefit of a healthcare team dedicated to not just keeping them well, but also to providing preventative care that leads to a healthy lifestyle. We need to assure that the community is aware of this benefit over other healthcare options.

**Q.** *From your perspective, what are strengths contributed to El Rio's success over the past 45 years?*

**A.** El Rio's major strength is its strong leadership and dedicated and highly skilled employees. Through leadership, El Rio has grown from a small westside clinic designed to serve an area of around 10,000 residents to what it is today. We have multiple campuses covering the entire metropolitan area, serving more than 92,000 patients. Our cultural beliefs are another example of El Rio's strength in serving the community. We model accountability at all levels. We value patients through compassionate care, and we let our employees at all levels know that their opinions matter and their voices are heard.

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# Q&A with Matthew Gaspari

Board Chair  
El Rio Health Center Foundation

By Mary Minor Davis

Matthew Gaspari is the newly elected chair of the El Rio Health Center Foundation Board and COO at Tucson Federal Credit Union. As he begins his two-year term, Gaspari sees his role as making sure El Rio is not the best kept secret in Tucson.

**Q.** *One of the strengths of El Rio is its focus on innovation in healthcare. How does donor and foundation support help with El Rio's initiatives?*

**A.** Individual donor, corporate and foundation support is critical to El Rio's ability to provide innovative healthcare. There are too many examples to list – but one is the El Rio Hospital-to-Home RN discharge program. This was the beneficiary of fundraising dollars from one of the two galas my wife and I chaired. It is a perfect example of how the El Rio Community Health

Center is innovating healthcare. El Rio nurses follow up with patients who are being discharged from the hospital. They ensure they've received their medication and are following instructions. They answer any questions the patients may have and they make sure that follow-up appointments are made and kept. The result is a reduction in re-admissions to the emergency room by 25 percent – which is phenomenal.

Without donor and foundation dollars, this program, which reduces cost to the system through fewer ER visits and enhances patient care, would be limited or wouldn't be available at all. So much innovation in the

providing of healthcare is done at the primary-care level and we need to find ways to make every dollar stretch as far as possible.

**Q.** *How do you see your ability to be innovative as a board member?*

**A.** As a board member, my job is to speak about El Rio every chance I get – to make sure that it is not the best kept secret in town. From the board innovation perspective, the foundation approved the charter of a young professionals group called El Rio Vecinos two years ago. The brainchild of board member Dan Chambers, the Vecinos are an amazing group of people, under 40 years of age, who are energetic and filled with passion for the mission of the El Rio. Through the Vecinos, the foundation

is reaching a new group of volunteers and donors that were potentially being missed previously.

**Q.** *What challenges lie ahead for El Rio?*

**A.** What we do know, and where El Rio comes in, is that the need for world-class healthcare isn't diminishing – it's increasing. El Rio Community Health Center served more than 92,000 patients in 2015. Over the next five years, we expect that number to increase substantially, which will be a challenge. Meeting the needs of that many patients will not be easy.

The foundation will continue to talk to donors and potential donors about all of the amazing programs the health center currently provides. Our donors are incredibly generous and we

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## Brenda Goldsmith Q&A cont.

grow. Not all community health centers accept private insurance – but he saw the value in serving all of the community.

Internally, Nancy Johnson, our current CEO, and her team are always looking at innovative ways to meet or exceed health standards. The senior leadership team will extrapolate priorities based on the national standards and work with both boards of directors on priorities. This in turn sets our fundraising targets. For example, we were able to raise over \$2 million for the clinical pharmacy program with the help of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, Bank of America Foundation and private donors.

**Q.** *Why should people support the El Rio Foundation?*

**A.** Today, El Rio is one of the 25 largest health centers in the nation for the number of people served. We're the one you want to help because we're the ones who have helped one in 10 Tuc-

sonans through healthcare challenges. We're not just for the underserved or uninsured – El Rio patients come from all sectors of the community.

Our job is to keep the whole family as healthy as possible so they don't need a hospital. We serve more than 92,000 individual patients. That shows trust. That shows confidence in what we're doing. I'm so confident that if I'm asking you for money, I know where it is going and that it is going to bring results. That feels really good.

**Biz**

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## Kathryn Beatty Q&A cont.

**Q.** *How long have you and your husband been patients? Why did you choose El Rio for your care?*

**A.** My husband and I became patients of El Rio around 1994. We were looking for one-stop shopping for our healthcare as we were living in a

rural area west of Tucson at the time. We found the southwest location to be the nearest full healthcare center to where we lived. Once we visited with our assigned primary care physician – Dr. Doug Spegman (now El Rio's chief clinical officer) – we were more than pleased.

**Q.** *What was your career background?*

**A.** After 21 years, I retired from Raytheon Missile Systems, formerly Hughes Aircraft, as a subcontracts administrator. During that period, and through extensive training, I was provided the opportunity to develop skills that will be valuable to me in my two-year journey in helping to lead this outstanding community health center.

**Biz**

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continued from page 169

### Matthew Gaspari Q&A cont.

are grateful for how engaged they are and how willing they are to help us achieve our mission.

**Q.** *From your perspective, what are the strengths that contributed to El Rio's success over the past 45 years?*

**A.** When I joined the foundation board five years ago, it was after a tour of the Congress center. The passion of the doctors I met, the tenure of the staff and the state-of-the-art equipment made a huge impression on me. You can't manufacture the type of culture that exists at El Rio – it can only be achieved through shared passion and dedication. The strength that led to the growth of the health center is and always will be the amazing people – like those I met that day. The care they provide is like the healthcare of old – they know the patients, care about them personally and spend as much time as necessary to ensure the patients' well-being. It doesn't get better than that.

**Biz**

## Frank Valenzuela

El Rio Patient &  
Health Center  
Board Member

Pictured with wife, Donna Whitman  
Photo courtesy: Randomly Media



"I've been on the El Rio board for over 25 years and have seen tremendous growth and impact in the community," said Frank Valenzuela, executive director, Community Investment Corporation.

"When I was chair of the board, we built our second clinic – the Midvale Park facility. We hired a professional fundraiser to help us fund the building with a goal of raising \$750,000. We ended up raising \$900,000 with a little over 100 donors. We even had a radio-a-thon to educate the public about El Rio. This positive response was a preview of things to come."

"El Rio is committed to providing quality and easy access to care for all in the community. I am constantly amazed at the caring, thoughtful attitude of the providers and staff at El Rio."

"As a privately insured party, I chose El Rio. I wanted to experience the delivery of care provided to our patients. As a board member, I wanted to remain anonymous so that I could "test" the medical experience. I was not disappointed. The accessibility, the caring attitude and the prompt attention are still in place. With a world-class medical facility and staff, who wouldn't want to choose El Rio."



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