

Improved Health, Restored Hope

A local healthcare facility answers
the call for **single mothers in need**

By Rachel Williford

Photo by Mark Susan

“Everyone knows a WellCare mom,” said Marge Ebeling, founder and president of The WellCare Foundation, a facility that provides free healthcare to qualifying single mothers. Currently, over 175,000 mothers and children are without health insurance in Maricopa County. This number is rising fast, adding to a cycle of unemployment, impoverishment and unnecessary family suffering. However, thanks to the vision of Phoenix’s WellCare program, mothers are receiving not only the gift of improved health, but also self sufficiency and the ability to “raise the bar” on their personal lives and careers.

The WellCare Foundation was founded in 1999 when Marge, a registered nurse and PhD educated in both nursing and religious studies, saw an incredible need for affordable healthcare at a Health Fair in which she was involved. “The women [present at the fair] would ask how much it cost to have a mammogram or a basic exam for their child, and I got tired of watching their faces drop when I told them the prices,” Marge recalled. Recognizing an opportunity to reach out, Marge assembled colleagues to work out a plan for these mothers, who were literally slipping through the cracks of health insurance, despite steady incomes. Three months later, with the help of donated time and pro bono work, The WellCare Foundation was up and running, offering cost-free healthcare to families through the volunteer services of participating medical practitioners. Today, 89 practitioners and physicians donate their time and expertise to the mothers of WellCare.

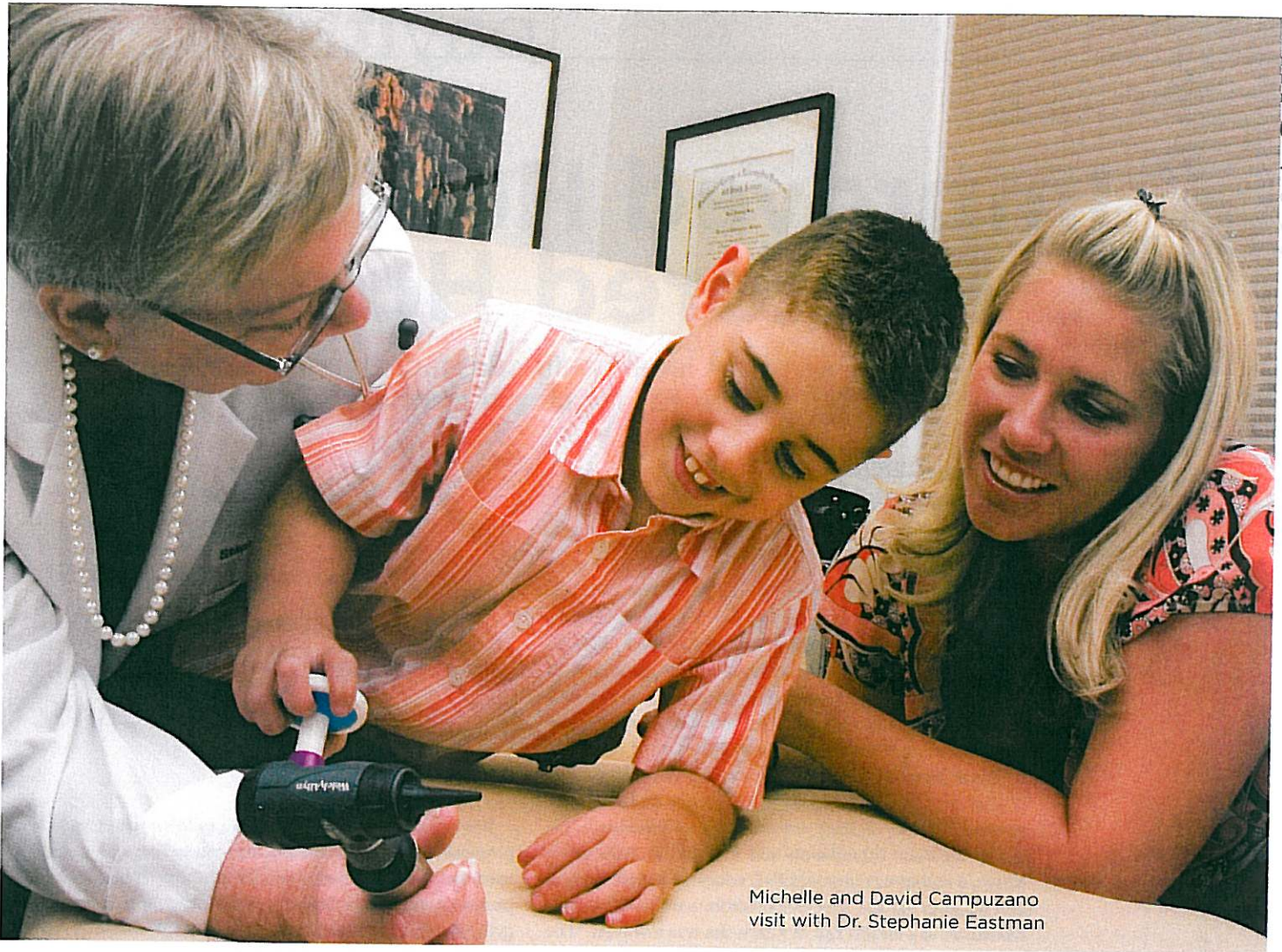
To qualify for the WellCare program, a mother must be single, working or enrolled fulltime in school, and unable to afford health insurance or needed health care; she must also not be reliant on state assistance. Once enrolled, Mom and her kids receive a comprehensive health evaluation that includes education, prevention and even nutrition. “It’s called Whole Person Care,” explained Marge. “When a child comes in with an earache, he receives a full assessment of health instead of a simple diagnosis. It’s time-consuming care; I wish my own healthcare was this good.”

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Services through the integrated health program include physicals, baseline mammograms, counseling, chiropractic care, nutrition, alternative medicine, therapeutic massage, pediatrics, internal medicine, ophthalmology, speech therapy, gynecology, osteopathic medicine, cardiology, radiology, MRI and more; labs and x-rays are also provided at no charge. The program does not offer aid for surgery, emergency room care, hospitalization or psychiatric treatments.

Volunteers, practitioners, primary care providers and specialty doctors are always needed in the WellCare program. Just as important are corporate sponsorships, which help to fund staffing and purchase medical supplies. Every service provided leads to the empowerment of these women and their families, because with improved health, mothers and their children are better able to contribute to the surrounding community. This circle of service is the foundation’s greatest goal.

The WellCare Foundation also has another mission: to be copied nationally. “This is a simple model, and I am happy to teach it to anyone who has the desire to run a similar clinic in their area,” said Marge. “We have capacity, and we need accessibility.” Clinic space for Maricopa County is currently donated by Boys and Girls Club in Tempe, Save the Family in Mesa, and the main office and clinic housed in Phoenix. The WellCare Foundation would like to establish clinics in Glendale, Peoria, Gilbert, and in northwest Phoenix, which would allow more qualified and deserving families to benefit from the program.



Michelle and David Campuzano visit with Dr. Stephanie Eastman

Healthcare is only the start. As the basic needs of these families are fulfilled, mothers are able to be more productive, missing fewer workdays due to illness; their children also miss fewer school days, benefiting their overall education. "My favorite part is watching these families improve. I wish I could take a before-and-after photo of when [a family] enters the facility to after their care is complete," said Marge. "They go through a transformation, and the difference is so dramatic."

Take for example WellCare mom Michelle Campuzano and her 10-year-old son, David. David was born three months premature and riddled with health defects ranging from cerebral palsy to epilepsy. Michelle had been caring for David alone since he was a baby and could not afford personal health insurance. She became depressed and developed an eating disorder for which state programs could not provide adequate treatment. "I was on auto pilot," Michelle explained. "I had absolutely hit rock bottom." When Michelle was introduced to Marge and the team at WellCare, she was able to receive weekly therapy sessions that helped to improve her coping skills, control her eating disorder, and give her hope. David was able to receive

chiropractic care for his epilepsy that was not offered through his own insurance program, reducing his dependency on medications that were severely stunting his growth. Three years later, David continues to reach new levels of improvement and growth, and Michelle is a fulltime student working towards a degree in non-profit administration and social welfare; she credits her family's success to the WellCare program and plans to work with WellCare moms once she graduates.

If you or someone you know is a single, working mother who cannot afford the cost of healthcare, or if you would like to find out how you can aid in the program, please contact The WellCare Foundation. With proper care and greater health, you improve not only your own life, but the lives of your children and their chances at a brighter, happier future. ■

The WellCare Foundation
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