

50-year legacy lives on at Carolyn Downs



We are tremendously proud to carry on a legacy that dates back 50 years, when Seattle's Black Panther Party founded the community clinic we know today as Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center.

It started out in 1970 as the Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic and was later renamed to honor a tireless Panther community organizer.

With donated medical supplies and doctors who volunteered their time, the clinic offered well-baby checkups, prenatal care for pregnant women, counseling for young mothers, screening for sickle cell anemia, and more.

In Seattle and in cities across the country, the Black Panther Party also organized free school breakfast programs, serving as inspiration for the free breakfasts that the U.S. government started serving at schools nationwide in the mid-1970s.

Of the 13 original Black Panther Party-founded healthcare clinics across the U.S., Carolyn Downs remains the only one still

in operation; it became part of Country Doctor Community Health Centers in 1988.

True to both clinics' roots, Carolyn Downs and Country Doctor share an enduring commitment to providing compassionate, innovative, high-quality care to our most vulnerable community members: patients of all races, religions and nationalities, regardless of immigration status; gender non-binary, gay or transgender patients; those who are homeless or re-entering society after incarceration.

After 50 years of going strong, the ripple effect within the communities surrounding Carolyn Downs and Country Doctor are testaments to empowering individuals to make a difference, both in their communities and in their own lives.

“Providing free medical services to the people was a revolutionary act then and now.”

— Rosita (Holland) Thomas

Seattle Black Panther Party member and Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic Cadre

Seattle Black Panther Party co-founder remembers ...

In 1968, after the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and the brutal murder of Bobby Hutton, the first member to join the Black Panther Party, at the hands of Oakland Police, the Seattle Chapter became the first branch formed outside California.

Organized to establish political power for Black People and to fight a long-standing system of racist oppression, members of the Black Panther Party set out to change the plight of Black communities across America “by any means necessary” and to fight for freedom and the human rights of all oppressed people.

Understanding that “Power” is the ability to define phenomena and make it act in a desired manner, the Black Panther Party organized a series of “community programs,” called “Community Survival Programs Pending Revolution.” The objective was not to just organize another community program but to build the capacity for people to engage in revolutionary change. In order to do this, we needed to understand the needs of the community and turn it into action, as Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Party said, “to capture the hearts and minds of the people.”

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The programs were rooted in the Black Panther Party’s 10-point program and in 1968, we started our first program, “The Police Alert Patrol,” to halt the murder of innocent black people. After learning that children in the community were going to school hungry, we launched the Children’s Free Breakfast Program, feeding 2,000 kids a week at five locations across the city.

In late 1969 after discovering the Central District had the second highest infant mortality rate in the State, the Black Panther Party set out to organize a free medical clinic. Under the direction of Panther Leon Hobbs and with the help of Dr. John Green, a revolutionary doctor from University of Washington Medical Center, the Black Panther Party opened The Sydney Miller Free Medical Clinic, named for one of our

fallen comrades, in January of 1970. Staffed by third- and fourth-year black medical students under the supervision of Dr. Green, the clinic operated without any outside funding.

The Seattle chapter launched a variety of other programs including: free pest control, free bussing to prisons and tutoring for inmates, free legal aid and a free food program, as well as broad-scale sickle cell anemia testing and blood pressure screening.

Realizing the community needed broader healthcare services, the clinic temporarily closed its doors in 1974 with the goal of reopening as a full-scale family medical clinic. Meeting with the other four free medical clinics in the area — Country Doctor, Sea Mar, Aradia Women’s Health Center, and the International District Clinic, we formed an alliance to bring the first infusion of National Health Service Corps funding to Seattle’s free clinics.

After securing a new location on 34th and Pike Street, planning for the Black Panther Party’s new Clinic was in full swing. In 1978, Carolyn Downs, who worked closely with me to re-organize the clinic, succumbed to cancer. I petitioned the board to change the name from Sydney Miller, to the Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center, which reopened in the spring of 1979, providing a full range of healthcare services for the community once again.

Years later, after merging with Country Doctor, Carolyn Downs expanded to provide even broader services to disenfranchised communities.

Fifty years later, the legacy of the Black Panther Party continues to thrive and is a shining example of how a determined group of young freedom fighters were able to overcome attacks by police, murders and imprisonment of their comrades and attempts by the FBI to destroy their organization, to make a lasting difference.

Elmer Dixon
Seattle Black Panther Party Co-Founder

Remembering Carolyn Downs

A tribute to Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center’s namesake hangs in the corner of the clinic’s waiting room, honoring a remarkable woman’s “tireless compassion and commitment to the underserved populations in the Seattle Central District.”

Born May 18, 1953, in Marshall, Texas, Carolyn Jean Downs joined Seattle’s Black Panther Party when she was 19, after moving to Seattle with her family. She dedicated the rest of her life to the movement for racial and social justice in her community.

She served up free breakfast to school children, sold the party’s newspapers on corners, drove busloads of community members to prisons to visitations, and played a critical role in gathering data on the lack of doctors serving the local black community.

Several other community health clinics, including Country Doctor, also lobbied for more federal healthcare dollars for the Central District and other underserved urban areas. Their fierce advocacy paid off. In 1978, new federal funding and the donation of a building allowed the Black Panther Party’s clinic to reopen, after a mid-1970s closure, and later expand.

Cancer cut Carolyn’s life short that same year, on June 18, 1978, just one month after her 25th birthday. We will forever owe her a debt of gratitude for the passion she brought to the fight for equity and justice through community health.

Seattle Black Panther Party Co-founder Elmer Dixon remembers Carolyn as a “selfless servant of the people.”

“To know Carolyn was to know what the life of a Panther was. It was a 24/7 commitment. Panthers worked tirelessly from sunup to sundown without pay or the need or desire for recognition,” Dixon says.

“This was Carolyn — shy in many ways but outspoken when she needed to be. She sought no recognition or reward. She just served.”



“My family and I are proud of my sister Carolyn’s legacy. It’s important that quality and culturally appropriate health care is provided to everyone, despite their ability to pay. As a board member, I’m honored to help lead this organization.”

— Mary Downs

50 Years of Pride and Power



Excerpt from the
Black Panther Party
10-Point Program

6.
“WE WANT
COMPLETELY
FREE HEALTH
CARE
FOR ALL
BLACK AND
OPPRESSED
PEOPLE.

We believe that the government must provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses, most of which have come about as a result of our oppression, but which will also develop preventive medical programs to guarantee our future survival. We believe that mass health education and research programs must be developed to give all Black and oppressed people access to advanced scientific and medical information, so we may provide ourselves with proper medical attention and care.”

1970

The Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic opens in the local Black Panther's headquarters on 20th Avenue and Spruce Street. The clinic's two major initiatives: a well-baby care and testing for sickle cell anemia, which becomes a catalyst for mass sickle cell testing across the United States and promoted public education about the disease throughout the Black community. Another Black Panther Party health initiative that later spreads nationwide: free breakfasts for school children.



Black Panther Party to Provide Free Sickle Cell Anemia Tests to Blacks

The Black Panther Party of Seattle is offering free immunization for children. The immunization offered are oral polio, measles vaccine, rubella vaccine and DPT vaccine.

The Panthers are also offering Sickle Cell Anemia tests at the Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic, 1129-18th Avenue.

Sickle Cell Anemia is a hereditary blood disease which affects more than 400,000 American children and young adults with 99 per cent of them black.

It is believed that the disease originated in Africa among Negroid persons. The disease in America claims the lives of 90 per cent of its victims before they reach forty. Most are gone by age 30 and over half die before age 30.

Identified in 1910, Sickle Cell Anemia is believed to have originated in Asia or Africa where it may have had a role in survival against malaria. Blood cells of sickle cell anemia patients are elongated instead of round.

Because of the distorted shape, the cells do not flow properly through small blood vessels. They jam together, stopping the flow and depriving nearby tissues of needed oxygen.

“Of course this government and their hospitals do not care enough about our lives to protect us against this disease.

The Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic will officially open Monday, December 21, 1970.

1972

The Black Panther Party revises the sixth point of its Ten-Point Program to reflect the importance of accessible Health care. Teams of community health workers provided social services and accompanied patients to hospital visits, a precursor to what are now known as patient navigators.

1974

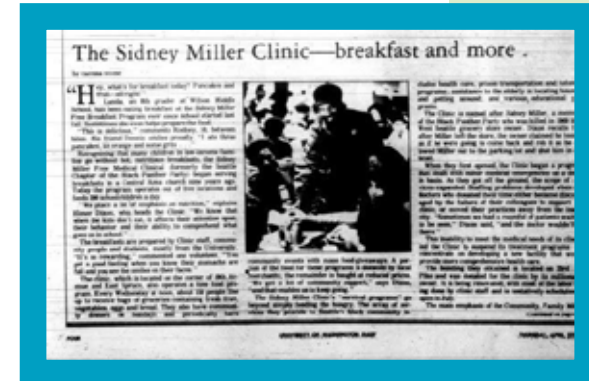
The clinic temporarily closes, with the goal of reopening as a full-scale family medical clinic.

1979

The clinic reopens, renamed after party activist Carolyn Downs, shortly after she died of cancer at age 25.

1988

Carolyn Downs becomes part of Country Doctor Community Health Centers, with a shared mission to improve community health with high-quality, caring, culturally appropriate primary care that addresses the needs of people, regardless of their ability to pay.



Photos on this page courtesy of Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, University of Washington

1968

Brothers Aaron and Elmer Dixon co-found the Black Panther Party's Seattle chapter, the first established outside the party's national headquarters in Oakland, Calif.



Aaron Dixon / Photo by Greg Gilbert / The Seattle Times

Aaron Dixon / Photo Courtesy of MOHAI Collections

1994

Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center moves to its current location on 21st and Yesler, carrying on the legacy of its founding principle to provide accessible medical treatment to all who need it.

2020

The Carolyn Down community honors the clinic's 50-year legacy of pride, power, and self-determination.



Courtesy of Atlantic Street Center



Courtesy of Atlantic Street Center

**A LEGACY OF SELF-DETERMINATION
YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW**

PROVIDER Q&A



Meet CeCe

Carolyn Downs' new clinic manager

Name: Seapa "CeCe" Stovall (she/her)

Job Title: Clinic Manager

At Carolyn Downs since: November 2019

How did your career in health care begin?

As an undergrad at UW, I worked at a plasma center and met a doctor who would talk with me about his work, got me thinking about pursuing healthcare as a career, and later hired me as an office assistant manager at his private practice. He treated every patient as a whole person. He cared about understanding them, not just their health, but who they were as people, their values and beliefs. He involved his patients as partners in their care. I moved on to work at Planned Parenthood, where I developed my sense of self, health literacy, community, patient advocacy, and impact, which led me to healthcare administration.

What do you like most about your job?

I really enjoy advocating for patients, helping them get healthier. I also like the administrative challenges of improving systems and operations, and creating a positive health culture. That means not only doing everything we can to improve the health of our patients, but also to making sure our staff have what the support and tools they need to do their jobs well, to work collaboratively, with cohesion. When we're healthy, too, our patients benefit from that.

What drew you to Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center?

The history and legacy. The community. The mission. The compassion and empathy. And, of course, the continued advocacy work for patients. It means a lot to me that Carolyn Downs' mission is to provide healthcare services to patients regardless of race, socio-economic status, gender, citizenship, education, etc. I love that students of color work as medical residents at Carolyn Downs. I'm a strong advocate for representation of our communities. And I love the Central District. I lived here for many years, from my late teens until I was 30. It's fun to talk to people and share, "Oh, you remember so and so? I remember so and so!" I really like that connection — that history.

What aspects of the Black Panther Party's vision for community healthcare mean the most to you?

The Black Panther Party showed astounding determination, drive, and activism in raising awareness about a community of people (black, brown and poor) who struggled to get their basic health and educational needs met. Their community involvement went past healthcare services, with things like free breakfast for children, donations of clothing and legal aid, education programs, protection from police brutality, We carry on that commitment to community involvement with partnerships that provide food assistance to our community as well as free books and care kits to children and adults in need.

What are your hopes and dreams for Carolyn Downs?

That we continue to be innovators in specialized care and use of technology. That we can champion political action to secure more federal, state and private support for uncompromising, empathetic, high-quality care to all patients with or without insurance, no matter what their circumstances might be. That we gain strength in our fight for equity and justice through community health.

“We always knew and believed we were on the right side of justice, and seeing our legacy thriving is further validation of our righteous struggle for freedom.”

— Elmer Dixon, Seattle Black Panther Party Co-Founder

To support Carolyn Downs' legacy of pride, power, and self-determination for another 50 years and beyond, please consider writing us into your will.

For more information, contact Development Director Michael L. Craig at mlcraig@cdchc.org or 206-299-1614.



COUNTRY DOCTOR
COMMUNITY CLINIC



CAROLYN DOWNS
FAMILY MEDICAL CENTER



AFTER HOURS
CLINIC

COUNTRY DOCTOR COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS

cdchc.org

FIGHTING FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE THROUGH COMMUNITY HEALTH

COUNTRY DOCTOR COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS' clinics serve all patients with compassionate, comprehensive care, regardless of their ability to pay. As a nonprofit healthcare provider, we provide a warm and welcoming healthcare home to members of our community who live at disproportionately higher risk of chronic and life-threatening illness due to racism, discrimination and other systems of oppression. We treat each person's unique medical, mental health, and dental needs in a safe and supportive environment.