

# La Crosse Pediatrician's Care for Others Extends Beyond Community

Jennifer Wieman

Steven Manson, MD, has a fondness for quotes. His favorite from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is posted by his desk in his office at Gundersen Health System in La Crosse, Wisconsin. It reads: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?"

"That reminds me routinely about how I should focus my life," Dr Manson said.

That focus extends far beyond his pediatric patients at Gundersen, where's he's practiced the last 23 years and serves as chair of the Pediatrics Department. Doctor Manson dedicates his time in many ways. Whether it's speaking to an audience at city hall about bullying or reading to a group of children at Northwoods Elementary in La Crosse, his caring for others shines through. This also includes treating the more vulnerable residents in his community who come through the doors of the St Clare Health Mission, a nonprofit clinic in La Crosse, as well as Native American youth on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. It's for that reason Dr Manson received the Wisconsin Medical Society's 2015 Physician Citizen of the Year award.

Liz Arnold, who nominated him for the award, said Dr Manson is someone who would never seek recognition for his volunteerism—so she did.

"He embodies servant leadership," said Arnold, who is the administrative director of Gundersen Global Partners. "He leads in a posture of humility, and he always has the interests of others before himself.

"And he does everything so well," she added. "He does everything on his plate with excellence."

That includes volunteering every other month at the St Clare Health Mission, where he serves as medical director, and spending one week, twice a year at Pine Ridge, where he also

the clinic's door are adults, and on any given day, cases can run the gamut of minor ailments to something as serious as a heart attack.

Doctor Manson still remembers one particu-

*"It's often very daunting when you first think to consider going off and doing something you've never done before in a different place, but try to be open-minded and flexible and once you get there, then you will fall in love with the work and the people."*

serves as medical lead. The reservation is one of 3 sites that Global Partners serves.

## A Collaboration of Care

In 1993, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center (now Gundersen Health System) and Franciscan Skemp Healthcare (now Mayo Health Clinic–Franciscan Healthcare) collaborated to form the St Clare Health Mission, a nonprofit clinic in La Crosse for those who don't have access to public or private health care. That first summer the clinic opened, Dr Manson was one of 2 dozen physicians to volunteer their services. Twenty-two years later, he continues to see patients there, and in 2000, Dr Manson stepped up again when he took on the numerous administrative duties of medical director when the clinic's first director, Ralph Tauke, MD, decided to take on a different role.

Almost 100% of patients who come through

lar case, where a young woman in her twenties came into the clinic with chest pains and shortness of breath. Tests were administered, but the source of her symptoms could not be determined immediately. Concerned that it might be a pulmonary embolism, Dr Manson sent her to the emergency department, where her diagnosis was confirmed and successfully treated.

"A lot of folks who don't have insurance put things off, much to their own detriment obviously, and if she hadn't had access to our facility, might not have gone in and it could have been a lethal event in her case," he said.

A few weeks later that same young woman sent a thank-you card, expressing her gratitude.

Doctor Manson said they get a lot of those messages from patients. Some who may not be able to give back financially will even come back and volunteer to show their appreciation.



Steven Manson, MD, and his wife Peg volunteer their time reading to children at Northwoods Elementary School in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Dr. Manson received the Wisconsin Medical Society's 2015 Physician Citizen of the Year Award, which recognizes physicians who have volunteered their time and talents to improve their communities and honors recipients for civic, economic, and charitable services they provide.

Doctor Manson, a Gundersen Health System pediatrician, connects with a young patient during a trip to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota. As part of the Gundersen Global Partners' Pine Ridge team, Dr. Manson has made multiple visits to the reservation to provide pediatric care since his first trip in 2009.





**Doctor Manson, who serves as chair of Gundersen's Pediatrics Department, examines one of his infant patients.**

### **Gundersen Global Partners**

**[www.gundersenhealth.org/global-partners](http://www.gundersenhealth.org/global-partners)**

Started in 2008, the mission of Gundersen Global Partners is to improve the health and well-being of the global communities it serves, as well as inspiring volunteerism throughout Gundersen Health System and local communities.

Gundersen Global Partners serves the Matagalpa region of Nicaragua, Yelebon Ethiopia in Africa and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

### **St Clare Health Mission**

**[www.stclarehealthmission.org/](http://www.stclarehealthmission.org/)**

The St Clare Health Mission in La Crosse, Wisconsin, began in 1993 as a joint partnership between Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center (now Gundersen Health System) and Franciscan Skemp Healthcare (now Mayo Clinic Health System-Franciscan Healthcare). The volunteer-run, nonprofit clinic is open 2 evenings during the week, providing free medical care for people living in the La Crosse area whose income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. Since it opened its doors in the summer of 1993, the clinic has cared for more than 16,500 patients in over 75,000 clinic visits.

### **Children Are Children—Everywhere**

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation—roughly the size of Connecticut—is located in the southwest corner of South Dakota. It is the second largest reservation in the United States; Dr Manson estimated that up to 40,000 Oglala Lakota currently live there.

Seeing the poverty there first-hand—and for the first time—was an eye opener for him.

“That was a tremendously impactful experience for me. I’d never been on the reservation before and to witness the conditions under which these people live—only 9 hours from my home—was stunning,” he said.

In 2000, the US Census Bureau ranked Pine Ridge as the third poorest reservation in the United States. The life expectancy, according to Global Partners, is 48 for men and 52 for women. Doctor Manson said it is the second lowest life expectancy rate in the world. There also is a high rate of alcoholism on the reservation, 8 times the rate of diabetes compared to the general population, and high unemployment. The Indian Health Services receives \$2700 per resident, per year for health funding, but that only covers about a third of what is spent on the average US citizen, Dr Manson said. Pine Ridge’s communities also are very isolated from each other. It’s not uncommon for a family of 18 to live together in a 2-bedroom house and some homes may not have electricity, heating, or indoor plumbing.

“One of the things I noticed most is the resilience of these folks living in a very difficult environment with harsh conditions, but using their energy and talents to try to better the life of their fellow Lakota that live on Pine Ridge,” he said.

Something else Dr Manson noted is that the needs and desires of children are universal.

“These kids (on the reservation) grow up in tough conditions—where there’s alcoholism, family dysfunction, drug usage, etc—but they’re all wanting the same things. They want attention, they want love, they want affection. And we see that in our interaction with the schools and the Head Starts with the adults who are their mentors, they just flourish and bloom when that can be provided for them,” he said.

Prior to the first team going to Pine Ridge in

October 2009, a call went out to all Gundersen employees who might be interested in volunteering—at their own expense. Anyone who signed up would be paying for the trip themselves and using vacation time. That didn’t stop Dr Manson, who was one of the first to volunteer, in spite of his other commitments and responsibilities at the Gundersen and St. Clare Health Mission.

“For him to be willing to step up and say ‘I will go,’ is just even more of a testament of his willingness to give,” Arnold said.

But as Dr Manson is quick to point out, he’s not alone on these trips. Since 2009, more than 320 different volunteers, including physicians, nurses, medical assistants, social workers, behavioral health therapists, and community members have donated over 50,000 hours to Pine Ridge.

A trip in April of this year was Dr Manson’s ninth to South Dakota. During that week, he and the rest of the pediatrics team saw a combined 142 students for physical exams at 2 Head Start centers and 2 schools on the reservation. The exams fulfill a federal mandate for school enrollment and more funding based on that enrollment, but they also allow kids to participate in sport-related activities.

### **‘Pilamaya’**

One of the many mementos from Dr Manson’s trips to South Dakota is a small homemade poster from the children at the Porcupine Head Start Center with the Lakota word “Pilamaya” on it. Translation: Thank you. Doctor Manson said that poster and other treasures he’s received are daily reminders for him why he invests so much of his time doing what he does.

“I would encourage anyone who has ever thought about doing activities such as these to take the opportunity to do so,” he said. “It’s often very daunting when you first think to consider going off and doing something you’ve never done before in a different place, but try to be open-minded and flexible and once you get there, then you will fall in love with the work and the people.”

Caring for those close to home in La Crosse and as far as South Dakota, Dr. Manson has done exactly that.

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