

# WHY IS THAT MAN ON THE SIDEWALK, AND WHY ISN'T ANYONE HELPING HIM?

*The story of how a child's simple question inspired Jeannemarie G. Baker, MS '90 to create a nonprofit community mental health center, the first and only in New York managed by nurse practitioners.*

It's an old cliché, but sometimes it really does take the eyes of a child to see the world for what it is.

A quarter-century ago, Jeannemarie G. Baker, MS '90 was escorting her daughter's Brownie troupe on a field trip to New York City. Leaving Grand Central Station, a five-year-old boy who was tagging along with the group spotted a disheveled man sprawled on the sidewalk. "Why is that man there?" the boy sobbed. "Why isn't anyone helping him?"

"That little boy cut right to the heart of a major social crisis in America," recalls Ms. Baker. "God bless him. His words had an enduring impact on me."

At the time, Ms. Baker was a stay-at-home mom who had put her nursing career on indefinite hold. But as her two daughters got older, she grew restless. For a while, she worked as a potter in her home studio. "But I felt I was alone too much, and it was time to get out in the world and start giving a little more," she says.

Long interested in psychology, Ms. Baker began working as a counselor at the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health in New York City, a pioneer in caring for those on society's bottom rung. It was there that she found her niche, and her calling.

She then enrolled in Columbia's graduate program in adult psychiatric mental health nursing. Upon graduation, in 1990, she trained at the Family Institute of Westchester and

later began teaching at the School of Nursing. She also established a private family therapy practice in Riverside, CT, where she has a home. While her practice was rewarding, she says, "The people at the Postgraduate Center residence were tugging at my heart. One day, I said, 'I'm going to create a place for people in need who have been virtually ignored by society. A place where they can get the kind of care and comfort that only nurses can provide.'"

Six months later, she closed her practice and began planning a mental health center for men and women who had fallen through the cracks, the invisible New Yorkers struggling with chronic mental illness, homelessness, or substance abuse – or all of the above. The broken man lying on the sidewalk all those years ago had not been forgotten.

Ms. Baker spent the next three years learning everything she could about community mental health as well as about business administration and fundraising. Along the way, she completed a postmaster's residency at Project Renewal in the

Fort Washington Men's Shelter, located next door to the School of Nursing. The shelter was once the city's largest, housing hundreds of homeless each night, an all-too-visible reminder of our collective failure to fulfill the social contract. "I was always afraid to go in there," Ms. Baker admits. "I never went into the shelter until I decided to start this place."



left:  
Entrance to St. Paul's Center  
on West 34th Street in  
New York City.

by GARY  
GOLDENBERG

photos by  
CHARLES  
MANLEY

## *A Refuge for the Down and Out*

"This place" is St. Paul's Center of New York, an independent, nonsectarian, not-for-profit community mental health center located on West 34th Street in Manhattan. What makes St. Paul's Center noteworthy is that it is run and staffed solely by nurse practitioners in psychiatry – unlike any other mental health center in the state or, quite possibly, in the nation. "I always thought that nurse practitioners, working independently in the community, could do

stance abuse. Services provided include individual, group and family therapy; medication management; assessment and referral, with intensive follow-up for illnesses related to chronic mental illness; crisis services; assistance with Medicaid; and coordination of services with other agencies and health providers.

The Center owes its name to Ms. Baker's brother Paul, who was paralyzed by polio at age nine, just before the advent of the Salk vaccine in the 1950's. "He became the focus of my family," she says. "There were seven

friendly receptionist and a cozy warren of rooms decorated in warm pumpkin hues. Little touches – like a sparkling clean bathroom and a collection of floral-patterned teacups (once owned by Ms. Baker's mother-in-law) for use by the clientele – send a subtle but important message to visitors that they matter.

St. Paul's Center's size and independence – most of its funding comes from philanthropy – give the Center the flexibility to care for patients in a way that its large bureaucratic counterparts cannot. A while back, a homeless

left:

Jeannemarie Baker with  
Glen Wurtzel, MS, NP '02,  
St. Paul's Center staff member



center, left:

Jeannemarie Baker,  
Director and Founder



right: Gwendolyn

Mercer, MS, NP '00,

St. Paul's Center staff member



far right:

Tea set for Center clientele

this kind of work and do it well," Ms. Baker explained. "The research shows that the main reason why people don't use the mental health system is that they perceive a lack of respect, lack of continuity, and difficult access. These are areas that nurse practitioners are especially good at addressing."

Now in its third year, St. Paul's Center is dedicated to delivering comprehensive and continuous care to adults who suffer from serious and persistent mental illness, especially those at high risk for homelessness, needless hospitalization, incarceration, and sub-

stance abuse. "The research shows that the main reason why people don't use the mental health system is that they perceive a lack of respect, lack of continuity, and difficult access. These are areas that nurse practitioners are especially good at addressing."

### *Hidden Resource*

Like the population it serves, the Center is all but invisible to passersby, hidden in a stairwell below St. Michael's Church, a block or so west of Penn Station. However, those who find their way inside are greeted by a

man who had been living on the streets for well over a decade came to the Center seeking only medication management, not therapy. Normally, clients can't pick and choose what services they want from mental health programs. "But we said yes," Ms. Baker recounts. "We arranged for him to come here every day so that we could give him his medicine. Our hope all along was that with patience and compassion, we would eventually be able to win his trust and engage him in therapy. We succeeded at that and since then it has been so rewarding to watch

him progress. At first, he was closed down. He wouldn't even look at you. Now, he comes early and he chats and says hello to everybody. And we were even able to help him get housing." There are dozens more stories like his.

Still, the Center can't escape all entanglements with government agencies or their rules and regulations. One example is the New York City Human Resources Administration regulation requiring a physician's signature on a housing referral. A nurse practitioner's John Hancock won't suffice. "We're taking that one all the way to Albany,"



says Ms. Baker, a note of anger rising in her otherwise calm and soothing voice. "State Senator Tom Duane, who has been a real friend to us, has introduced a bill into the Senate to change that regulation. I hope that they will understand that it is not going to hurt anybody if we help a homeless person find a decent and dignified place to live. Most people don't want to work with this population, and now the powers that be are trying to keep us from doing it comprehensively and effectively."

### *Slow Growth Policy*

The Center's staff – Glenn Wurtzel, MS, NP '02 and Gwendolyn E. Mercer, MS, NP '00, both alumni of the School of Nursing's graduate program in adult psychiatric mental health – together see up to about 54 patients a week, making a small but important dent serving the city's mentally ill homeless population. Unfortunately, there's no shortage of people in need of such services. In November 2005, some 32,000 homeless men, women, and children were sleeping each night in

space," she says. "This size is ideal. It is personal, soothing, and warm, not like the average clinic for the homeless. It is what these folks need."

"I never went to business school, but I've learned a lot about business," she adds. "If you grow too fast, you can ruin yourself. So we're growing intentionally very slowly. I don't want our nurses to burn out. Part of our mission is to keep staff here over a long period of time, so they can develop trusting relationships with our patients."

According to Ms. Baker, there is

*"St. Paul's Center is a new model of wise and compassionate care that offers hope and healing to the many who find their way through its door."*

Penelope Buschman, MS, CS, FAAN, Assistant Professor of Clinical Nursing, Columbia University School of Nursing

city shelters – an increase of 51 percent since 1998, according to the Coalition for the Homeless. It is also estimated that 40 to 50 percent of homeless single adults residing in the municipal shelter system have a chronic mental illness.

Given these numbers, Ms. Baker hopes to expand St. Paul's Center in the years ahead, not by growing the current facility but by launching additional community centers and serving as a model of care for others. "We would never want to expand this

ample opportunity for other nurses to follow in her footsteps. "You could do this in any basement of a church or synagogue on any block in the city," she says. The philanthropy is out there to support it, she adds, and so are the nurse practitioners. "That's another reason why this model will work – the nurses. They're a big draw. US News and World Report conducts an annual survey of the public to determine the most trusted profession, and nurses are always at the top."

## *The Human Piece is the Priority*

A young boy may have given Ms. Baker the initial inspiration to start St. Paul's Center, but it was the School of Nursing faculty that gave her the archetype. "Columbia's nurse practitioners offered great role models for doing something like this," she says. "They gave me the courage to try." She is particularly beholden to Penelope Buschman, MS, Assistant Professor of Clinical Nursing and Director of the Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner Program, who serves on the Center's Board of Directors. "St. Paul's Center wouldn't exist without her," says Ms. Baker. "She has been our collaborator and consultant throughout. We are also very fortunate to have an involved working Board that has been incredibly supportive."

Accordingly, Ms. Baker is more than happy to offer the Center as a clinical site for Columbia students. One of the first to do an advanced practice internship there was her daughter Angela, a 2005 graduate of the Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner Program. During her stint at the Center, Angela created an important patient survey tool and assumed the responsibilities of a psychiatric NP with supervision. She's now working in the Neurogenetics Branch of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, MD.

Another Columbia student, Claudia Tindall, MS '06 worked at St.

Paul's Center for two semesters, finding that it affirmed her decision to specialize in psychiatric mental health nursing. "I never worked anyplace where money wasn't the bottom line, and that made it extraordinary," says Ms. Tindall, a research nurse in the Department of Medicine's Division of Nephrology at Columbia University. "We never skimped on services because the money wasn't there to pay for them. Ms. Baker sets the tone for that. The human piece is the priority. I secretly hope I can go back to St. Paul's Center. I felt like it was a home for me."

In addition to the hard work and dedication of the advanced practice NP students, Ms. Baker is also very grateful for the many volunteers who have supported the Center with donations of supplies and services. Still, finding the money to run the Center is a constant challenge for Ms. Baker. "A lot of people we see at the Center can't pay, or they don't have benefits," she says. "I'm constantly trying to walk that fine line between worrying about costs and fulfilling our mission."

## *Time for Family*

A few months ago, she reluctantly stopped seeing patients in order to focus on administration and fundraising. She has also "pulled back" a little from St. Paul's Center. "I was obsessed with this place," she confides. "I'm trying to simplify my life and provide more balance. I'm also starting to think about what the next chapter is going to look like. I love this stage of life, and look forward to seeing more of my

family. I definitely plan to get back into my pottery studio."

Ms. Baker has been married for 38 years to William F. Baker, president and CEO of PBS's flagship public television station Thirteen/WNET New York. Their daughter, Angela, is married to Douglas Howard, a geologist. The Bakers have another daughter, Christiane, a children's television producer. She and her husband, Bruce Schneider, have a three-year-old daughter, Chloe Grace.

Coming from another person, Ms. Baker's desire for a little "R & R" might sound like a retreat. But in her case, it's probably more of a respite. After all, there's the ghost of that man on the sidewalk to contend with, and the piercing questions of that little boy.

*"St. Paul's Center represents an exciting and compassionate alternative for a population which has often been overlooked and underserved."*

Thomas K. Duane, New York State Senator, 29th District