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Jim Keck was instrumental in the founding of the clinic. He was interviewed by University of Baltimore students Lee Kenny with Brandi Jones and James Lyle on October 12, 2011. This interview was edited by Beverly Bowers and Elizabeth Nix.

JIM KECK: Okay, the clinic was actually established in 1970 and the '60s were a very tumultuous time. There were lots of civil rights marches and people being killed. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Martin Luther King was assassinated, Robert Kennedy, who was probably going to be the next president, was assassinated. There was a terrible war going on in Vietnam which -- nothing like the wars today. I mean, tens of thousands of American soldiers were being killed and tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. There were marches and protests everywhere and it was a horrible war. Do you know what napalm is?

Kenny: Yes sir

JIM KECK: Okay, napalm was being used indiscriminately in Vietnam. This is a picture of a child that was napalmed.

Kenny: I've seen this photograph, very famous photograph

JIM KECK: A group of nuns and priests in the area along with a few other friends decided on their own type of protest. They raided a draft office in Catonsville. Carted out a bunch of files, draft files, of people who were going to be drafted and sent to Vietnam. Dumped them in the parking lot, poured napalm on them and set it on fire. This group was known as the Catonsville Nine. There grew up in Baltimore an organization called the Baltimore Defense Committee which was there to support the Catonsville Nine and also to protest the war. In August of 1969, the Baltimore Defense Committee had a conclave, a meeting, to try to decide what the future course of the organization should be. We had protested in DC, we had protested the war in New York, protested the war in Baltimore. And we had this meeting to decide what should be the next step. And at that meeting I raised a question about negativity. I said we are protesting all the time. We think there need to be positive changes in society but we're not doing anything positive. We're always being negative, protesting. Mary Moylan, and that's the person that my son's middle name is after, Mary Moylan was a nurse and was one of the Catonsville Nine and she said, "Look, the Black Panther party has established of free clinics in a number of cities in the Midwest and out west. Why don't we establish a free clinic, together, with them, as partners." And the group voted and said, "Yes this would be a good thing let's do that." So we approached the Black Panther Party and they agreed. And so there were three things that we needed: money, a building and medical personnel. So I drafted a form with the Black Panther insignia on it and the caduceus that with the fist in it which was the Free Clinic's symbol. And it wasn't called People's Community, we weren't going to call it the People's Community Health Center. It was called the People's Free Medical Clinic. And the phrase that we used was that "medical care is a right, not a privilege" and therefore it ought to be free.

And so I sent fundraising letters to all of the mailing lists of the Baltimore Defense Committee and we had another group called Teachers Concerned about Vietnam and said if we're going to do this we're going to need money. And we're going to need money on a regular basis so we not

only want you to contribute but to also make a monthly pledge that you're going to send in every month. As a response to that mailing, a doctor by the name of Lee Randol, a pediatrician, approached me and said, "You know, I would like to be a doctor in this free clinic you're going to set up." And I said, "Great, we're now starting to get money, we now have a doctor, we need a building."

We went and started looking for a building in West Baltimore because that was where the Panthers were headquartered and we found a building on North Carey Street and I remember on the second floor on this building on North Carey Street, I remember going in with Mary Moylan, myself, and Doctor Randol and the Black Panthers. And Doctor Randol was saying, "Okay, this looks good. We could put a couple of examining rooms over in this area and we could build a little laboratory over here. And while he was doing that, the Panthers were over at the windows saying, "We could sandbag these windows and have a clear line of fire down to the street from here." And I was scared to death that Lee Randol was going to be scared off by all of this but he never batted an eyelash and just kept going. It was shortly after that the Panther Headquarters, I believe it was in Chicago, was raided by the police and the word came down that Panther organizations were not to ally themselves with white groups anywhere because white groups were so infiltrated with police. So the Panthers said, "You know, we can't do this with you. We're out." But by that point I had raised about two thousand dollars and so we split the money evenly, gave half of it to the Panthers. And since most of us were from the Baltimore Defense Committee were from the Waverly-Charles Village area we decided at that point that it would be a better location for the clinic. And so started looking for a building there found one at 3028 Greenmount Ave., which is still the location, one of the locations, of the People's Community Health Center, and started to work putting the whole thing together. So that's sort of the background of how it goes there.

Kenny: Okay, interesting story. Well, what was your role in the early days of the People's Community Health Center, obviously as you said before originally named People's Free Health Clinic.

JIM KECK: People's Free Medical Clinic it was. My role was various. I was, 1) president of the board of directors. And 2) I was the chief fundraiser. 3) I was the coordinator for all of the volunteers. 4) it was my job to find a building and see that it was properly renovated into a useful clinic. And then the clinic opened in May of 1970, in this building at 3028 Greenmount Ave., which was formerly the Freitag School of Music, we rented it from its owner Charlie Freitag. And the clinic initially opened on Monday and Thursday nights from 6:00 until 10:00 and I was the Monday night coordinator, which meant that I was just in charge of making sure everything was there to see patients: that we had doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, patient advocates. Patient advocates were very, very important part of the clinic, and I can get to that later, but it was important to the whole concept of the clinic. And I remember we had a doctor, I have forgotten the doctor's name, who was the doctor on Monday night. But the night the clinic opened I said I would bring a deck of cards because probably nobody is going to come this first night because they don't know us yet. We had twelve patients the first night. So that was essentially my various roles and I continued in all of those roles for a very long time. Coordinating those volunteers was an amazingly difficult thing because we had, I had a file of over two hundred people who wanted, almost demanded, that they be given something to do to

help out. And to find something for two hundred people to do on a clinic that is open two nights a week, initially, of course then we opened up a women's night and then we opened up a fourth night and before long we had five doctors a night working Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night and Thursday night volunteering five different doctors. That's twenty different doctors, we had psychiatrists, psychologists, laboratory technicians, nurses, volunteers would just - those were days that were very different from today in that people wanted to do something positive, wanted to believe in this concept that there were a lot of people that needed medical care and couldn't get it.

Kenny: Those were different times. Sounds like you wore a lot of hats. Did you have a specific title, sir?

JIM KECK: I was, well I was I said I was president of the board, I was the Monday night coordinator, I guess chief cook and bottle washer.

Kenny: And sir, are you a medical doctor.

JIM KECK: No.

Kenny: What was the most rewarding aspect of your work?

JIM KECK: Oh gosh, I mean seeing all of these people who wanted nothing for themselves but just wanted to help people who were sick, people who were having mental problems, people who were pregnant and had no doctor to go to, I mean that was exceedingly rewarding, being able to participate myself and work in the clinic. I was taught to be an - I was advocate and that was very rewarding too. Doctors were looked upon by patients, people, as sort of a god. If a doctor said something you took it at face value, you didn't ask any questions and many of the times they didn't even understand what the doctor was saying and so no doctor saw a patient without an advocate. An advocate might have been a medical student or it might have been a person like myself who was knowledgeable enough to go in with the patient during the examination and say, "Okay do you understand what the doctor said? Do you understand what this means?" And if he didn't, explain it in layman's terms or ask the doctor to explain it in layman's terms, but not one patient was seen by a doctor in that clinic without an advocate in there with him.

Kenny: That's good. What was the most frustrating aspect?

JIM KECK: Oh gosh,[long pause] I mean, as we progressed we - our expenses increased and we were still getting - I remember there was this one, one fellow that, most people pledged a dollar or two dollars a month, there was one fellow named Chuck and he pledged twenty-five cents a month and for the seven years I was working there every month that twenty-five cents came in. So most of the experience was positive, but our expenses as we began to see more and more patients, our expenses started to increase and actually a lot of the patients had some kind of medical insurance, but when we tried to collect it we were frustrated because the insurance companies would say, "Well you are a free clinic. Why should we pay you to see patients if you are a free clinic?" So I calculated what it was costing us, since all the staff was for free. Well we had daytime staff who were being paid thirty dollars a week to keep the doors open and to take appointments and so on. But most of the staff, all the medical staff, everything was for free. So I

calculated what it cost us, in rent, utilities, we had to buy supplies and things and it cost us. It was about six dollars per person, so we finally broke down and posted a sign that said “People’s Free Medical Clinic. Cost is \$6, if you can pay.” And finally, we got the insurance companies to relent and to pay us six dollars a patient if the person had insurance.

Kenny: Okay and how long have worked at the clinic or how long did you work there?

JIM KECK: Well, it was about nine months getting it started and then I worked there for seven years after that.

Kenny: Then from 1970 –

JIM KECK: To 1977.

Kenny: Okay. Do any particular instances stand out during your time there?

JIM KECK: Oh gosh,[long pause] Not really. Nothing in particular that I can think of other than, as I mentioned, being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people who wanted to serve, who wanted to help. I can’t think of anything in particular.

Kenny: How were decisions made during the years you were at the center?

JIM KECK: All right, the clinic was a truly democratic institution, I mean I had the title “president” but you know there were no powers essentially associated with that it was just you have to have, if you are incorporated, you have to have a president and we had non-profit status, and that’s another interesting story I can tell you about, but we had non-profit status and so you had to have a board of directors and a president, but the decisions were all made by community meetings and I mean we would get together in a community meeting with any and all of the volunteers who wanted to come and any of the people in the community who the clinic served and decisions about, you know, what to do and how to do things, decisions about – we initially would agree to serve anyone in the city of Baltimore but eventually we were so overwhelmed seeing, you know, two hundred patients a week and more and more coming in all the time and we couldn’t handle it so we decided that we wanted to be a *community* health center and so we limited the area in which we would see people to basically the Waverly-Charles Village area.

Kenny: Okay do you know how many patients the clinic treated per year, approximately?

JIM KECK: Well, as I said, we had gotten up to about two hundred per week so that’s probably about ten thousand a year.

Kenny: Okay. What was the relationship between the health center and the Waverly community? It’s basically I think you’ve elaborated on that before.

JIM KECK: Yeah, basically the community - the Waverly community and the Charles Village community - were seen as not only the community as we serve, but that anyone from that community could - was free to come in and attend any of our regular meetings. I mean we had

regular, meetings of the staff and the community to talk about the clinic, to talk about how things were going, how could they go better, what would make people feel better about the way things were going, were waits too long, should we make appointments, things of that sort. And so the community was totally involved in that and the community folks that served during the day keeping the office open so that people could come in and make appointments or whatever.

Kenny: Okay, what services did the clinic offer? I think you had mentioned some of them before.

JIM KECK: Oh gosh, yeah, I mean we had, we offered regular medical care, we offered dental care, we had built a dental office into there and I'm talking about in these first few years of the clinic. I'm not talking about after it became the People's Community Health Center but while it was still the People's Free Medical Clinic we had medical care, dental, we had psychologists and psychiatrists on staff, had drug abuse counseling, alcohol abuse counseling, treatment of chronic medical problems like heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, you know, it was a complete health center: mental and physical.

Kenny: Sounds like it. Could you elaborate a little bit more on the roles of the volunteers?

JIM KECK: Well, everybody was a volunteer except for these few community folks that we paid thirty dollars a week to staff during the day. So the role of the volunteers was to do everything that the clinic does.

Kenny: Okay it basically revolved around the good Samaritan works of the community.

JIM KECK: That's right.

Kenny: Okay. Can you think of anyone else that we should talk to about those early years?

JIM KECK: Well I passed a ton of names on to Beverly Bowers already who I think passed them on to Doctor Nix, is it?

Kenny: Yes

JIM KECK: Yes. I can't think of anybody who I have not already mentioned to them.

Kenny: Okay. How have your opinions about healthcare delivery changed since your work with the health center?

JIM KECK: I thought that the general healthcare system in this country was rotten back then and I think it is pretty bad still. You know, I don't know if you saw Michael Moore's documentary on healthcare in France, Cuba, Canada, England. All those places have better healthcare systems and anybody in any of those places can get whatever healthcare they need whether they can afford it or not. And in this country, you know, the people that get the best healthcare are the people that have the most money.

Kenny: Sure

JIM KECK: And that hasn't changed and it's my opinion that healthcare is a right not a privilege.

Kenny: Right, I agree. What criteria did the patients need to meet in order to receive the free healthcare?

JIM KECK: Initially nothing, they just had to walk through the door. Later, as I said, we had to establish a limited area because we were just overwhelmed with so many people coming in. But the criteria was you need care.

Kenny: There wasn't a financial limit? People under a certain --

JIM KECK: Absolutely not, you know, we would ask people "if you could make a contribution we would like you to do so but if you couldn't don't worry about it." And there was no pressure in that regard what so ever.

Kenny: Okay. Is the health clinic still in operation, still operational?

JIM KECK: Well it has metamorphosized quite a bit since then. It now operates out of several different locations, the staff is all paid, for the most part; I'm sure they still have some volunteers. But they get grants from the government and they get insurance payments from the insurers. So it's a different animal now, but the thing I understand is the same is that no one is turned away if they don't have insurance or can't afford to pay.

Kenny: Okay, well was there anything else --

JIM KECK: I just wanted to give you an anecdote I told you that we were a 501c3 organization, a non-profit organization, and I kept, I kept all the books for all the money that came in from the pledge system and I had a little notebook that I wrote every nickel or dime that came in, and a lot of it was nickels and dimes, and also in that same notebook I kept track of all the expenses. What we, we bought gloves, we bought baby powder, we bought alcohol, we bought this, we bought that, we bought sheets for the examining tables, et cetera. Well, in about 1973, I think it was, the IRS decided to audit us and they came in, they actually came to my house cause that is where I operated out of, and talked to me about how we raised money and how did we keep track of finances and I showed them my notebook and so he flipped back to 1971 and went down and he said, "Well, here's an item that says in August in 1971 you paid ten dollars and twenty-five cents for rubber gloves. Can you show me a receipt for that?" And so I said, "Wait a minute" and I walked back and I brought back my shoebox full of envelopes for 1971, pulled out the August envelope, leafed through it and handed him the receipt and he said, "Okay, we're done. You're fine." So, the IRS gave us a clean bill of health.

Kenny: That's good to hear. Do you stay in contact with any of the people that worked in the clinic?

JIM KECK: Well, one of my best friends is Barbara Dent who, number one, was one of the original donors to the clinic. She sent in a dollar a month every month for seven years. But I asked her when I decided to retire from the clinic if she would take over as president and she

agreed. She had to be voted in by the community group, but she was voted in as president to replace me in 1977 and I forget how many years she served; but she's still one of my best friends, you know.

Kenny: Okay, is there anything you would've changed about your time at the clinic?

JIM KECK: I don't think so. I can't think of a thing. I mean, it was just such an exciting and rewarding experience and something that, you know, was a lot of hard work but just made you feel really good.

Kenny: Do you remember the hours of operation? It wasn't an all-night clinic, was it?

JIM KECK: No it was open initially Monday and Thursday from 6:00 until 10:00, but we were never out by 10:00.

Kenny: Sure

JIM KECK: It was always 10:30. 11:00 sometimes later. And eventually Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 6:00 until 10:00.

Kenny: Do you remember any particular patients off hand that struck you as memorable?

JIM KECK: Ooooh. Um, no you know, it's just been so long ago, you know, names just escape me now. But I can't believe how long ago it really was.

Kenny: Was there any other details you wanted to add?

JIM KECK: No, I mean, well, you know, it was all about, remember I'm talking about volunteers; I was a teacher at that time teaching at a local private school. And it was interesting, that private school had a fundraiser for a charity every year: students went out raise money doing car washing and bake sales and so forth and so on and traditionally they did something like the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association. So this year they voted and some of the students, some of my students, said we wanted to make it the People's Free Medical Clinic and that didn't make the administration of the school real happy. But, they had a vote and the American Cancer Society won, but about a hundred students said, "We're not going to do that, we're going to do it for the Free Medical Clinic." And they did all of their fundraising for the clinic and raised a couple thousand dollars, which, I'm not sure if we would've been able to open in May of 1970 if it had not been for the two thousand dollars in addition to which they came in and supplied the labor. We had a carpenter to work on just building the examining rooms and the laboratory and so forth and the students come in and worked as laborers with the carpenters to get all that done. So that was something special for me that my students felt that way.

Brandi: That passionate enough that way. Wonderful

Kenny: Yeah, very good. I think we have everything we need from you sir. We appreciate you taking the time to answer our questions.

JIM KECK: You're very, very welcome. I was very pleased to do it. And I wish we could get that kind of volunteer help for everybody that needs it today cause people just don't think that way anymore.

Brandi: No they don't.

Kenny: Sure. Well, we appreciate your efforts for the community sir and taking your time.

JIM KECK: Good, and is this going to be put into some sort of form that we could see later?

Kenny: I'm pretty sure we're making a webpage about it on Wikipedia.

JIM KECK: Ah cool.

Kenny: So this will be something that you could look at afterwards with some pride on your accomplishments. We thank you for helping the community and answering our questions.

JIM KECK: Well and I thank you all for doing this. I think it's important to bring that kind of spirit back to mind to people today so that, you know, maybe we can get some of that kind of volunteerism and some of that kind of healthcare today.