

Staying Healthy

SUMMER 2022

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The new Axis health center on West Las Positas Boulevard opened on March 14, 2016, doubling the nonprofit provider's service capacity.

AXIS

50 years of affordable health care

Axis Community Health marks milestone anniversary, eyes expanded services into future

By JEREMY WALSH

To provide quality, affordable, accessible and compassionate health care services that promote the well-being of all members of the community.”

The mission statement of Axis Community Health may seem simple enough, but the effort to fulfill that vital vision day in and day out remains anything but.

One of the most important nonprofit organizations in the Tri-Valley, Axis this year is celebrating its 50th anniversary of serving the region's most in-need residents — folks who would often otherwise fall through the cracks of the mainstream health care system, primarily for financial reasons.

“More than 15,000 Tri-Valley residents are served by Axis, through services that include medical and dental care, behavioral health, a WIC

nutrition program and a variety of services that extend out into the community and at local schools,” longtime CEO Sue Compton, who is retiring this month, told the Weekly.

“Throughout its incredible history and evolution as a community health center, Axis has remained true to its mission of providing high quality care for all members of the community, regardless of income, language or any other factor,” Compton said.

James Paxson, current chair of the Axis Board of Directors, added, “The trajectory of Axis over the last 50 years in terms of providing a fundamental community service to address the health care needs of the most vulnerable in the Tri-Valley is nothing short of astounding.”

Indeed the origins of Axis Community Health certainly fit the bill of the proverbial humble beginnings.



Axis Community Health held its 50th anniversary celebration last month in Pleasanton.

CHUCK DECKERT

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Walking across America

Pleasanton woman writes book about completing half-marathons in every state

By **MELISSA MCKENZIE**

Pleasanton resident Patricia Vicary has accomplished a true feat of endurance: she has not only completed at least one half-marathon in every state and Washington, D.C., but she has written a book about her experience.

In “Power Walk!: My Step by Step Journey to Competitions Across America,” which is part guide and part travel log, Vicary, 64, approaches the subject of long distance power walking with humor and insight into what it takes to plan and complete a visit to and race in every state.

Whether it’s following a race caravan to finish four races in four days or traveling across the United States by train, Vicary details her experiences walking throughout the country, and at one point, briefly into Canada, in her book.

“It’s a light read,” she said. “There’s so much crazy stuff that happens — things with porta potties at the races and airplanes you end up on that have you thinking you’re not going to make it. So, hopefully, it’s told with some humor and relatability, but also it’s motivational at the same time.”

As a child, Vicary said she was not athletic and went to great lengths, even at the expense of failing PE, to avoid participating in organized activity.

It wasn’t until college, while sidestepping a science course requirement, Vicary enrolled in a foundations of physical education class. In that class, she was forced into the movement

she had avoided for so long, as the course included a lab requiring students to run three a week. Vicary’s outlook on movement began to shift and she went from shying away from physical activity to willingly participating in it.

Vicary found flexibility in running and enjoyed being outdoors, but as she entered her 40s she realized running was no longer serving her body properly. She, again, had to shift her outlook.

“Over time I found that my body wasn’t happy with the results of running,” she said. “You end up with physical problems. When I was in my 40s, I started to power walk instead and the great thing about power walking is it gave me all the benefits of running, and I got to be outside and have the flexibility of if I was doing it solo or with a group of people. But it didn’t have all of the pounding on my hips and knees and back.”

Vicary soon joined a couple online power walking groups and started racing more, focusing mostly on half-marathons. She finished her first out-of-state race, the Nike Women’s Half Marathon in Washington, D.C., as a power walker in 2013. Vicary continued signing up for races occurring while she was traveling, but didn’t initially set out to complete a race in each of the 50 states.

“The (year after D.C.), I did a race in Utah, Oregon and Washington in collaboration with trips,” Vicary said. “So, I was slowly doing it, but it wasn’t until I hit state 15 that I became serious about it. I enjoyed traveling and

thankfully my family was indulgent with me. It eventually flip-flopped and I went from doing a race where I was on vacation to building my vacation around the race.”

Throughout 2019, she crossed 20 states off her list. However, with just three states left, Vicary found herself stuck when the COVID-19 pandemic caused races and travel to temporarily cease. It was during that time she decided to take the power walking blog she was keeping and transform it into what would become her book.

“It grew out of a blog just talking about my adventures power walking all over the place,” she said, adding, “I hope people will find it motivating to switch up the exercise program they’re currently doing and they’ll find some entertainment value in following my adventure.”

Vicary said she keeps herself motivated by limiting her walks to three times a week, supplementing her walking with barre workouts and giving herself one rest day.

Her next goal, she said, is finishing 100 half-marathons, which she expects to complete this October in Portland. And, while her current race pace is about 12:30 — faster than some people run — Vicary said she simply wants people to enjoy moving.

“I’m 64 years old and I’m still doing it,” she said “I’m not some amazing miracle specimen and I think that’s one of the things people will get out of this. It’s such an accessible form of exercise and something people can do



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Patricia Vicary, after taking part in a PPIE Run for Education.

throughout their lives.

“Whether you’re doing a 15, 16, 17 or more minute pace, it’s all good,” she continued. “Just get out there and enjoy it and have fun.”

“Power Walk!: My Step by Step Journey to Competitions Across America” is available on Amazon in paperback and ebook form. Signed copies can also be purchased locally at Towne Center Books on Main Street in Pleasanton. ■



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Livermore mom turns to activism during son's drug battle

Mothers Against Drug Deaths seeks to humanize addiction, highlight risks of fentanyl crisis

By JEANITA LYMAN

Jacqui Berlinn had been quiet about her son, Corey Sylvester's, battle with drug addiction, until a picture she saw on social media — and the comments on it — made her stop short and drove her to break her silence.

"My son's been an addict on the streets with some stints of sobriety for about 10 years now," Berlinn said. "One day I was scrolling on Facebook and came across 'BART Rants and Raves,' and there was someone passed out on BART. And people were making comments about 'what a useless human being' and all that ... and I looked closer at the photo, and I realized it was my son."

Berlinn, a Livermore resident, said that the image, and the insults in the comments that ensued, stuck in her head. She wasn't able to let them go.

"I had to say that's my son, and as soon as I said that it completely changed the tone of the conversation," Berlinn said. "I think just humanizing my son made people start saying 'I'm so sorry' ... they just looked at him differently."

"That was a huge change, just claiming him as a son that I love," Berlinn added.

A mother's perspective

Berlinn said that Sylvester had struggled with anxiety and depression early on, as well as attention deficit disorder (ADD) and processing troubles that made reading in school difficult and led to self-esteem issues.

"He started to self medicate, I think from his mind always spinning and always going," Berlinn said. "He started smoking marijuana in high school, and things just kind of snowballed from there."

Berlinn said that her son, who she continues to have a close relationship with and speaks to regularly, despite his struggles with addiction on the streets of San Francisco, told her about his first experience with hard drugs, when he finally accepted a high school girlfriend's offer at the then-Livermore Honey and Wine Festival.

"When I found out he smoked heroin at the Honey and Wine Fest in Livermore, I was just so surprised that it was in our city," Berlinn said. "I guess I was ignorant at the time and I don't really blame parents about being ignorant, because I was too. But that's why, as a mom, why I feel I need to speak out."

After the Facebook post that first led Berlinn to speak up about her son, she began to do more research and be more outspoken on social media. She ultimately caught the attention of Berkeley activist and author Michael Shellenberger, who interviewed her for his 2021 book

"San Fransicko."

When Shellenberger asked if she was interested in activism surrounding drug addiction amid the increasingly dangerous landscape fentanyl paints for users, Berlinn said she had initially been taken aback, never having seen herself as an activist. Ultimately, however, with Shellenberger's encouragement, she made her first foray into the activist arena.

"So I started Stop Fentanyl Deaths, because when we were talking about the book, I said I was upset that dealers were just allowed to sell so openly on the streets of San Francisco without any pressure. So I said I want to go protest and tell them to stop selling to my son," Berlinn said.

Berlinn's early organization rallied in downtown San Francisco last year to call for addressing issues that they saw within the city's Tenderloin Linkage Center. In particular, Berlinn and other activists were concerned about drug use and sales continuing to be allowed in the facility, which they said they had previously been optimistic about.

"We were very excited, but they were allowing drug use and sales in there," Berlinn said. "So we protested against the drug use in the linkage center, not the linkage center, but the drug use in the linkage center."

Berlinn said that counter-protesters arrived at the event, but that they were confused about her group's aims.

These earlier efforts ultimately led Berlinn to find other mothers going through similar circumstances — and to the founding of Mothers Against Drug Deaths late last year.

"I think mothers are absolutely huge in this because we can humanize our children, and we love our children, and we know them in a way that no one else knows them," Berlinn said. "And I know who my son is. I know he's funny, and kind, and thoughtful and smart."

Berlinn noted that this perspective is not one taken into account in most people's initial reaction to homeless people struggling with addiction on the streets.

"I think that mothers can stand up for their children and say you know what, my child is sick and he needs help," Berlinn said.

Media attention

Although more and more attention has been centered on the rise of fentanyl recently, amid a more than 1,000% rise nationwide in overdose deaths from the dangerous drug, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Berlinn said that her organization's focus is on a more holistic picture of the risk of drugs in the 21st century.

"We're not only talking about fentanyl, but we're against deaths by all drugs. And what I noticed when I

started looking into this activity is what San Francisco does, so they go on their harm reduction," Berlinn said. "It's ... enabling. They don't talk enough about recovery. They talk a lot about how to keep using and staying alive — and some of that is good, and I do believe in Narcan and clean needles — but I don't believe in removing all pressures on addicts and dealers."

Berlinn said her stance came from personal experience, and that MADD's efforts wound up centered in San Francisco due to it being a common factor in where members either lived or had addicted children on the streets. This focus, and the group's scrutiny of San Francisco officials leading with Mayor London Breed, resulted in a high-profile billboard in the city.

"After about three months, Mayor Breed decided to end her declaration of emergency that she had declared and we were like, 'What are you doing? Nothing's changed,'" Berlinn said. "And on top that she goes to Europe and tells people, 'Come to San Francisco, it's a great place to visit.'"

After some fundraising, Berlinn's group paid for a billboard reading "Famous the world over for our brains, beauty and, now, dirt-cheap fentanyl" to be displayed for a month over San Francisco's Union Square. Although the effort garnered widespread media attention, Berlinn said that tangible effects on the ground from Breed and other officials were still lacking.

"We got a lot of press around that, and we were hoping something would change, but Mayor Breed didn't really do a whole lot differently," Berlinn said.

Despite the media attention, Berlinn said she was discouraged that outlets such as MSNBC and CNN hadn't picked up the story, while conservative outlets such as Fox News were. However, she said she was eager to educate parents and children through any platform available.

"I did Tucker Carlson not because I'm a huge fan of him, but because I believe the families who watch Tucker Carlson, their children deserve to hear the message as well," Berlinn said.

Berlinn said the motivation for her and others at MADD, despite their scrutiny of policies in San Francisco amid a surge of unflattering right-wing media attention to the city and surrounding area, was entirely non-partisan. And they were frustrated by a landscape in which drug addiction is painted as a polarizing issue.

"This is a nonpartisan issue," Berlin said. "It has nothing to do with liberals or conservatives. It has to do with saving lives, and it's very frustrating to me that we can't get on



COURTESY JACQUI BERLINN

Jacqui Berlinn still talks to her son Corey Sylvester regularly amid his addiction struggles. She said he knows the work she's doing and is supportive.

these news channels that think all we're trying to do is put down the liberal leadership, and that's absolutely not what we're doing."

"I try to explain to people that we're just trying to save lives, and I'm not saying that one political person is better than another, but I can definitely say that the policies that are lenient and enabling that I'm seeing in San Francisco are not helpful, and my son would even say that," Berlinn added.

Berlinn said that while she and others in MADD see policies in San Francisco as enabling users rather than contending with the root causes of addiction, they are well aware of the delicacy of treating mental health and addiction issues.

In her experience though, Berlinn said that harsher penalties had been more effective for Sylvester.

"The times where I was able to get my son to go into rehab was when he'd been arrested and he had a couple of days in jail, and he got sober and got some clarity," Berlinn said. "Is arresting addicts the best choice? No. Is putting pressure on them so they can choose rehab over jail a good choice? Yes. So I would like to see mandatory rehab for repeat offenders."

Taking the fight to Sacramento and beyond

Having recognized Breed's limitations as mayor to contend with an issue ravaging the state and nation both, Berlinn said that she and MADD were now directing their

efforts further up, with a new billboard in Sacramento.

"We believe honestly that it's not something (Breed) can even fix on her own, so we thought OK we'll go to the governor. Maybe he has some resources and he can step in and he can give her the resources she might need," Berlinn said. "That's why we did the billboard in Sacramento calling on Newsom to close the open air drug markets in all of California as well as San Francisco."

The shift in focus toward the state and nation, rather than concentrating efforts in San Francisco, comes as fentanyl continues making its way to the surrounding areas, including the Tri-Valley, Berlinn said.

"I work in Oakland, and I mean, I see the fingers of what's going on in San Francisco slowly reaching into the counties surrounding San Francisco," Berlinn said. "My son tells me he sees more and more high school-aged students come into the city and buy fentanyl and bring it back with them."

In Berlinn's view, the rise of fentanyl, as well as increasing acceptance for prescription drugs and marijuana legalization, have led today's youth to be less afraid of drugs, despite fentanyl making them riskier than ever, making conversations with kids as young as pre-teens necessary.

"It definitely needs to be started in middle school sadly, and I think in middle school because marijuana

AXIS

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Recognizing the need to provide pediatric care to low-income children in eastern Alameda County and southern Contra Costa County, a grassroots group known as the Health Care Concerns Committee formally incorporated as a nonprofit agency in 1972 to bring their vision into reality.

Their first clinic, serving kids who had no other access to health care, operated out of a small house on Spring Street in downtown Pleasanton under the leadership of founding director Birdie Bianchi.

“Its ‘startup’ funds totaled \$800,” Compton said, looking back at the organization’s history. “The clinic grew slowly in the early years and, as services expanded to include adults, it moved over to a small apartment complex on Railroad Avenue.”

The relocated Valley Community Health Center would offer adult medical care, women’s health services and a women, infants and children (WIC) nutrition program in the heart of downtown Pleasanton.

As the calendar turned to a new

decade and the need in the Tri-Valley kept growing, the nonprofit positioned itself to increase services with a senior support program and mental health counseling. By the latter part of the 1980s, a satellite clinic opened in Livermore, in the city’s Multi-Service Building.

The organization continued to serve those in need and diversified its programs as opportunities arose as the 20th century became the 21st, including rebranding as Axis Community Health in 2004, renovating its Pacific Avenue clinic in Livermore in 2006 and redesigning its Railroad Avenue space in Pleasanton three years later.

“But a lack of resources prevented the organization from being able to fully meet the needs of the community,” Axis officials said.

That strain would be eased thanks to two key turning points that truly altered Axis’ path.

The U.S. Bureau of Primary Health Care granted Axis the status of “federally qualified health center” in 2009, which led to an influx of federal funding that also increased after the implementation of the Affordable Care Act nationwide in 2010.

After that juncture, the number of patients for Axis increased by 40% — leading to a pressing demand for more space.

Axis bought a 24,000-square-foot building in Hacienda Business Park in 2011, with the goal of developing the office building into a clinical facility. A years-long fundraising campaign followed, positioning the nonprofit to start construction in 2015.

The \$12 million facility on West Las Positas Boulevard opened its doors in 2016, doubling Axis’ service capacity.

Over the next six years, Axis would continue to expand its services and locations throughout the Tri-Valley, with support from public and private funds.

“I have been a patient at Axis Community Health for several years, and I cannot speak highly enough about their quality of care, facilities and their human touch,” said Deneen A., an Axis patient whose last name was withheld for medical privacy reasons. “I recently had a tooth extraction at the new Axis dental clinic in Dublin and was very pleased with the results. The community is fortunate to have this quality well ran resource.”

Jared H., another patient who asked not to be fully identified, added, “Axis Community Health is my psychotherapy counselor provider. They have always treated me well, they accept many insurances, and also have a sliding scale for those with no insurance and low income. Everyone is very friendly and makes sure I feel comfortable and welcome.”

“From its start as a small organization in cramped quarters, it has grown into a multi-site organization providing key services to thousands in the region least able to afford health care,” Paxson said. “Axis has grown to supply not only primary health care needs but to address other areas of health including mental and behavioral health, dental health and specialty health services for its clients.”

Axis opened the Tri-Valley’s first-ever affordable dental clinic for low-income and uninsured residents in 2019 in Dublin.

New renovations at the Railroad Avenue facility were also completed that year, which included an integrated behavioral health building and a second area that houses the



Axis expanded by adding dental services for all ages at a new site in Dublin just over three years ago.

call center, medical records, patient referrals and billing.

In early 2020, Axis added orthopedics, acupuncture and chiropractic care to its collection of services.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, forcing the nonprofit to convert nearly all of its services to telehealth but eventually also allowing it to expand its reach by implementing COVID-19 testing and vaccination services.

As of this spring, Axis had administered more than 23,000 tests and 26,000 vaccination doses for COVID-19.

With mental health care and emergency response being cast into the spotlight during the pandemic, Axis partnered last July with the cities of Pleasanton, Livermore and Dublin, along with Alameda County, to develop Axis Bridge — a new mental health urgent care service that “provides rapid access to mental health services, care management and psychiatry services for anyone who is facing an urgent mental health concern,” according to Compton.

“Axis is growing and expanding its response as a provider. Plans are in place to open a new clinic to bring proximate services to its clientele,” Paxson said, adding:

“Axis has always been a leader in innovation and its growth over the next several years, both in terms of facilities and services, will allow it to be able to provide a more comprehensive and broader form of support

to those in need.”

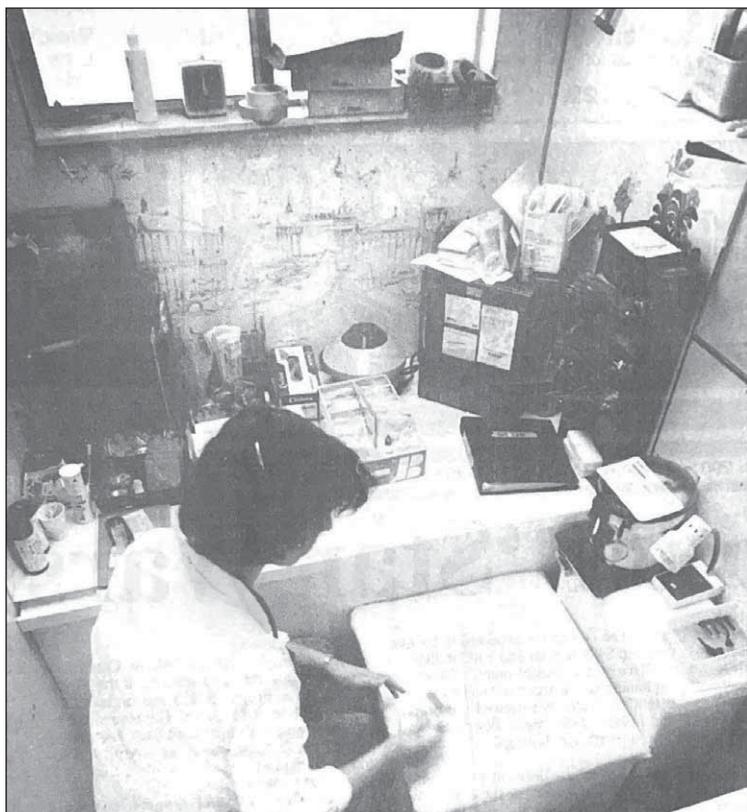
The increased presence in Livermore will be via a new 8,600-square-foot facility in a building the nonprofit purchased in downtown to offer additional medical, behavioral health and dental services. The site is scheduled to open in late 2023.

“We are so proud of the legacy that 50 years of service has brought to the Tri-Valley area. It is an incredible honor to serve our most vulnerable community members and provide them with best in class health care,” Axis’ incoming CEO Liz Perez-Howe told the Weekly.

Perez-Howe, the organization’s chief operating officer since 2013, was selected by the board in April to succeed Compton upon her retirement this month after 15 years at the helm. Both featured prominently in Axis’ 50th anniversary celebration held in early May.

The organization that began in five decades in a converted small house with just three staff members has evolved into an affordable health care network with five locations in the Tri-Valley, nearly 200 staff members and an annual operating budget of \$31 million.

“We know that a strong and healthy community depends on strong and healthy residents,” Perez-Howe said. “Our team has never been more committed to living our mission to reach the underserved. We look forward to our next 50 years.” ■



A medical assistant conducts a pregnancy test on a toilet cover in Valley Community Health Center’s lab, a converted bathroom, in 1989. Notice the desktop covers a bathtub.

ACTIVISM

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has been legalized for people 18 and older, so they don’t see it as a threat,” Berlinn said. “But honestly there have been some teenagers who have died from smoking marijuana that’s been laced with fentanyl, so they really can’t trust that anything they get on the streets that doesn’t come from a dispensary or doctor is going to be safe.”

“I think parents need to tell their kids that there’s some new things

in drugs that can literally kill them if they take it one time,” Berlinn added.

In particular, Berlinn pointed to the easy availability of counterfeit prescription drugs on social media platforms such as Snapchat, which she said her younger child isn’t allowed to use.

“They can order what they think is a Xanax or a Percocet and have it delivered to their home like a pizza, and they take it and they can die in their bedroom,” Berlinn said.

Although she lauded harm

reduction efforts such as fentanyl test trips, Berlinn noted that these were unreliable for pills in particular, and not perfect in general.

“It’s almost like wearing a condom and having sex,” Berlinn said. “You’re still taking a chance.”

With the rise of fentanyl and the ubiquity of young people’s curiosity about, and experimentation, with drugs, Berlinn said that the most dangerous idea for parents was that drug addiction and overdose death aren’t risks for their children in particular.

“I have met a number of parents who thought ‘not my kid,’” Berlinn said. “They had no idea this would happen. They knew nothing about these things until it happened to their 4.0, musically talented, amazing kid ... If you’re saying ‘not my kid,’ if you think it can’t happen to your kid, you’re fooling yourself because it only takes them experimenting one time.

“And these days, especially with the culture around drugs right now, I think more than ever they think it’s OK to try. And it’s not.”

Like many parents of pre-teens and teens, Berlinn said drug use was already popular when she was growing up. However, she emphasized that modern drugs such as fentanyl paint an entirely new, and more sinister, landscape than parents might be familiar with.

“It’s not the drugs we were dealing with when we were kids,” Berlinn said. “This is so much more deadly and addicting.”

Learn more about Berlinn’s organization at <https://mothersagainstdrugdeaths.org>. ■