

Lowe converts Springs Health Center to MAHEC

By MICHAEL O'HEARN, *Tryon Daily Bulletin*, January 8, 2016



ASHEVILLE –

Trel Lowe has something to celebrate when it comes to the New Year, bringing MAHEC to the Foothills as well as reaching a milestone in her career.

Lowe, a native of Spartanburg, converted her Springs Health Clinic to the MAHEC clinic during December.

Before that, she celebrated her 40th year as a nurse practitioner in November, coming a long way from starting her career in Saluda.

“I was working at St. Luke’s in the emergency room in the early ‘70s and the North Carolina governor had established a rural health program at the time, which was the Saluda Medical Center,” Lowe said. “I was asked if I wanted to get my nurse practitioner at Chapel Hill and so I said, ‘Sure,’ and that was to be the nurse practitioner at the Saluda Medical Center.”

The medical center opened in Saluda in 1975, and Lowe said the opening was delayed two weeks due to the delivery of her second son.

Lowe worked there for a few years before transitioning to Columbus to work at a practice in town for 13 years.

Since that time, Lowe said she has worked in Polk County, opening the Foothills Medical Center in the 1990s before leaving it in the late ‘90s to work on the U.S. and Mexico border with her husband.

“I worked there for community development and health missions, and my husband and I did that for the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. for about four years,” Lowe explained. “When we came back here, we noticed the healthcare environment had changed dramatically and the need for healthcare and people who had no healthcare, Medicaid or Medicare was tremendous. We decided to open a practice that would serve that community.”

From that need arose Springs Health Center in Mill Spring just off of Highway 108 past Polk County Middle School.

“We operated here since 2004, and in the last couple years it’s become increasingly difficult to remain a private practice,” Lowe said about the old facility. “I also wanted to be able to see more patients and provide more services than I was able to do as a private provider. It just made sense to go with MAHEC because they share the same philosophy in patient care that we do.”

Lowe credits the death of her husband two years ago as being part of the reason she made the switch to being known as a MAHEC clinic.

“When my husband passed away two years ago, it was hard for me to do this by myself,” Lowe said. “MAHEC can take over and do management while I can take care of patients, which is what I love to do.”

Lowe recounted the history of MAHEC, which dates back to the early 1970s, a few years before Lowe got started in the medical field after graduating from USC Upstate with her degree in nursing.

“Serving people regardless of their problems, their age and hopefully being able to put in more variety of services, MAHEC has been in existence since the early ‘70s,” Lowe explained. “It initially began as an education

center for healthcare professionals, hence the name Mountain Area Health Education Center. Over the years it has evolved to include a mountain area residency program, a surgical program and now has seven practices around Western North Carolina.”

MAHEC’s main clinic is in Asheville and is headed by CEO and President Dr. Jeff Heck.

“Trel has provided great service for 40 years, which is a very long period of time in that area,” Heck said. “She’s served that area well and we were excited that she was interested in working with a larger group. MAHEC does have a practice in Lake Lure which serves those counties that meet in that corner so having a relationship with Trel makes it easier and extends coverage to her practice.”

The staff working at the MAHEC clinic has been with Lowe almost since the firm opened as Springs Health Center in 2004.

“We’ve been a team for quite a while,” Lowe said. “The favorite part of my practice here is that it is a true family practice. I was with mothers when they delivered and I’m now seeing their children and their grandchildren.”

Forty years of being a nurse practitioner has taught Lowe how good people can be and their capability to help one another.

“People are basically good and, in general, want to help themselves and help others,” Lowe reflected. “It is a privilege to walk with them in that journey in any form of nursing. Nurse practitioners are, hopefully, nurses first. They bring to their jobs that view that encompasses not only the physiological but also the socio-economic family dynamics and can see the big picture of health. That is the greatest thing about being a nurse practitioner.”

Nurse practitioners, in Lowe’s words, bring to the table a broad scope of understanding about the patient.

“When they look at a patient with a problem, they don’t look at it through just the eyes of a physical problem,” Lowe explained. “It’s not just a physical problem. They look at that patient’s history, their socio-economic issues, their nutritional issues and at it from the whole perspective. It’s holistic and that’s the background of the practitioner.”

However, Lowe said she also needs to know the limitations of her personal scope, which would then lead her to collaborate with others in her field.

“If I don’t know it, if I don’t have the knowledge, skills or background to treat, then I would need to know to call my collaborating physician, for example, or to whom do I refer that patient,” Lowe said. “Diabetes, for example, you know someone might have diabetes but then also a lot of issues on top of that, and I feel that I don’t have the most knowledge on that so I would have to find a chronologist.”

In a sense, a family nurse practitioner has to be a jack-of-all-trades, according to Lowe.

“There are nurse practitioners that specialize in other areas just like any healthcare provider but family nurse practitioners have to have background in everything from pediatric newborns to geriatric medicine and internal medicine,” Lowe said. “For example, that patient may have high blood pressure but he’s also a truck driver and he’s having trouble exercising, so how can we help him exercise and eat right? We do this rather than just another prescription.”

Lowe’s services can include everything from treating a cold to doing lab work on cholesterol levels and physicals. Basic health care and health education are also provided at her firm, according to Lowe.

However, certain services such as X-rays and laser work are not provided by the MAHEC clinic. Lowe said she would refer her patients to the emergency room in that case, like if someone broke their leg, for example.

“Here, you’re going to get a name recognition when you walk through the door,” Lowe said. “You’re going to get someone who is going to ask you ‘What’s going on with your kids, how’s your mama?’ You’re going to be coming into your other living room and you’re going to be meeting your other family.”

Anywhere from 15 to 20 patients typically come in daily to Lowe’s clinic in Mill Spring.

Aside from being a nurse practitioner, Lowe spends her free time doing anything from jewelry making to gardening and raising cows at her Saluda residence.

“We do it as a team, we do it and we love our patients,” Lowe said. “I’m glad to see MAHEC move into the area so they can provide more services.”