

MAHEC doctor to retire, leaves \$500,000 for geriatrics

By BETH WALTON, *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 24, 2015



ASHEVILLE –

Dr. Suzanne Landis may be retiring from her work as director of the Center for Healthy Aging at the Mountain Area Health Education Center, but her legacy will live on with a pledged \$500,000 gift.

The Geriatric Medicine Fund will be used to advance geriatric care at MAHEC and to promote the health and well-being of older adults. An endowment will be set up in Landis' name to fund an academic position for a national expert to teach and practice geriatric medicine at the school, said Dr. Jeff Heck, president and CEO of the medical training facility.

"Dr. Landis doesn't just embody the heart and soul of MAHEC, she helped create it," he said.

Landis plans to retire at the end of the month after spending 28 years advocating for healthy communities in Western North Carolina. She worked as a clinician and teacher at MAHEC in the Family Medicine Residency and the Geriatric Medicine Fellowship programs.

"I feel very passionate about geriatric care," said Landis, who studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and completed her residency and other graduate work at UNC Chapel Hill. "We have far more older adults in our region than the rest of the state or even the United States."

Landis is best known for her work establishing Project Access. In response to a growing number of uninsured residents in Buncombe County, in 1996 Landis led the way to create a network of volunteer physicians willing to serve low-income, uninsured populations. The program now reaches more than 3,000 people a year.

"She convinced all of her colleagues to provide free care to their patients who didn't have health insurance," Heck said. "She didn't really

sell them the idea based on money or providing any kind of incentives. She just appealed to them on the fact that it was the right thing to do.

"It turned out to be one of the most successful programs in the country."

Project Access has received numerous accolades in the last 20 years, including the Innovations in American Government Award. More than 120 communities across the country have replicated the Project Access model.

"It was the first time that charity care from physicians was truly coordinated," Landis said. Before, doctors would donate their services, but without the support of laboratories, pharmacies or hospitals, that care was limited, she added.

In retirement, Landis has no intention of leaving medicine behind. In addition to spending more time with her family, she plans to continue her research and work part time for Care Partners' PACE program.

The Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly helps older generations needing more specialized support stay in their homes. "Older adults are wonderful to take care of," Landis said. "They are so wise. They have great stories. They appreciate the services that you can provide."