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MedVan Crusade Mobilizes in Chelsea

By Charlotte Cowles



Chelsea Now photos by Jefferson Siegel

David Wood taking a diabetic patient's blood sample inside the MedVan.



The MedVan parked outside the Church of the Holy Apostles on 28th Street and Ninth Avenue in Chelsea.

Whenever Steven talks, he must keep one hand free so that he can place his large index finger on an apparatus fixed to the front of his throat. "It's a trache," he explained, his voice a whispery croak between belabored wheezes. "It helps me to breathe." If he continues to lose weight, he said, it will be taken out. "So it's not forever," he said, offering a proud, dimpled smile.

A mentally disabled veteran, Steven was homeless, nearly dead with pneumonia, and weighed 600 pounds when found in a makeshift bed under an area of scaffolding one cold night several winters ago.

The man who discovered him was David Wood, an employee of the MedVan, a mobile medical service that provides free health care to the homeless and uninsured. Wood recruited help and rushed Steven to Bellevue Hospital, where he received emergency treatment for severe pneumonia and morbid obesity.

Steven now holds a clerical job in his residence program and has lost nearly half of his original weight. "David really helped me," he said, explaining how Wood found him an assisted-living residence after he was discharged from the hospital, and then referred him to the place he lives and works now. "When I was in the hospital, David came to visit me," Steven said. "That made me feel really good." He added that he sees Wood on a regular basis, "Just to say hi. Whenever I see him, he always says, 'Do you have problems of any kind?'"

Wood said he had been keeping an eye on Steven for some time while making MedVan stops at various soup kitchens and shelters around the city, which include three weekly visits to the Church of the Holy Apostles on 28th St. and Ninth Ave. in Chelsea. "I knew where he was staying, under that scaffolding on 27th Street," he said, "and it was clear to me he had pneumonia." Highly respectful of his patients' privacy, Wood shied away from giving details, but said Steven had been initially reluctant to go to the hospital despite Wood's frequent urging. "It got to the point where I didn't think he would make it through the night," he said. "That's when we went and picked him up."

The MedVan itself is a miniature doctor's office on wheels: an old, revamped motor home outfitted with all the necessities of a small clinic, including two examination rooms, examination tables, supply cabinets, and a refrigerator for vaccines and medications. It is owned and run by Project Renewal, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping New York City's homeless move off the streets and, with the aid of various assisted-living programs that address everything from drug addiction to psychiatric disease, eventually attain self-sufficiency. The MedVan has existed in various forms since the mid- 1980s, first operating out of a minivan, then a smaller RV, and now the larger mobile unit.

Today when Wood walks through the bustling soup kitchen at the Church of the Holy Apostles, he can barely take five steps without being mobbed by current and former patients. Dressed in his usual jeans and black vest with combed, graying hair, white muttonchops and glasses, his appearance doesn't scream "healer" in the middle of the lunch crowd. But everyone knows who he is.

“Dr. Dave! Look, my leg’s all better!”

“Dr. Dave, I’ve been meaning to stop by to talk to you about my foot again. It’s still acting up.”

“David, did I tell you about my trip to London? Have you ever been to London?”

He moved from table to table, greeting each patient by name.

“How’s that cut of yours?” he asked, walking up to the food line and tapping a man on the shoulder. The man made a closing motion with his forefinger and thumb. “All healed!” he proclaimed. “Good,” responded Wood. “Stop by later today and I’ll check on it to be sure.”

The patients, mostly men of all ages and races, give mixed answers to Wood’s gentle but firm questions about their well-being. No one seemed to be lying to him, although some hesitated guiltily before admitting they hadn’t yet filled a prescription or followed his referral.

“A lot of people aren’t compliant, but they’re open about it,” he said. “And I’m here, where they eat lunch, so I can follow up with them.” Wood added that many people are extremely patient, traveling across the city to meet him at one of his various locations if he tells them to come back on a specific date. “People are very forgiving. They come a couple of times if we can’t help them right away,” he said.

Wood, who also travels on foot to various other homeless programs outside MedVan hours to provide medical care, said that the van has become an institution within New York City. “Sometimes we’ll be driving, and people will stop us because they think we’re a clinic,” he said. “Once some out-of-towners stopped us on Houston [Street] because one of them was having chest pains. We helped them out, and went on our way.”

In addition to Wood, who is certified as a physician assistant, the MedVan staff consists of a doctor, two van technicians and psychiatrist two days a week. Tracy Jones, 36, one of the van technicians, is also certified to do blood work and HIV testing, and has been working in the van since 2000. “The staff here—we’re like family,” she said. “We work good together.”

The van’s users vary from an elderly Asian couple who has a home but no health insurance, to a middle-aged man living in a homeless shelter who recently lost his job at a bookstore.

A woman with a Jamaican accent sat on the MedVan examination table and explained that she was experiencing hot flashes and memory loss, despite having “everything removed” several years ago. The doctor asked the patient several standard questions covering alcohol and drug use, smoking status, and her history of taking medications or suffering from allergies.

When the woman got down from the examination table, she discovered that she had wrinkled and torn the protective paper covering the shabby leather seat. Distressed, she attempted to smooth the paper, apologizing profusely for having ruined it. The doctor assured her the paper was fine.

Wood and the MedVan staff visit the Church of the Holy Apostles on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays for several hours during the day so that they can catch the crowds that attend lunch at its soup kitchen. The kitchen is among the largest in Manhattan, dishing up over 1,200 meals a day.

“Whatever happens elsewhere happens five times as much here,” said Wood about Holy Apostles. “There’s an energy here.”

A social nature indeed exists throughout the kitchen as diners cajole and banter, and the soup kitchen staffers know many of the men who come in by name. “People come here to trade tips or cut deals on places to stay, or if they’ve

heard about employment opportunities,” Wood said.

Clyde Kuemmerle, the kitchen’s associate program director, surveyed the lunchroom and proudly talked about today’s menu—Spanish chicken with rice—and the men and women enjoying it. “I know hundreds of them,” he said. “I know their stories.” Kuemmerle spoke highly of Wood, saying that he was a well-respected and much needed figure in their community. “Many people living on the street have enormous medical problems,” he noted.

“These guys all trust Dave Wood a lot, and many of them do not trust people easily.”

The MedVan, for all its saintly purposes, is cursed with frequent engine trouble. Ask anyone what Wood thinks the MedVan should improve or change, and he’s quick to say one thing: “They need a new van.”

“It’s a lemon,” said John, one of Wood’s former patients and a regular at the soup kitchen. “Under the old New York ‘Lemon Law,’ they would have a new van by now—if a car breaks down more than a certain number of times, you take it back to the shop and they have to give you a new one!”

Last Tuesday the van broke down, but Wood and a doctor came to the Apostles soup kitchen anyway, quickly setting up shop in a small side room and admitting patients waiting for medication and help. The effort was worthwhile, as one man was very sick and perhaps suffering from an infection after having some cavities removed several days earlier. Wood calmed him down and called an ambulance with minimal fuss.

“He’s amazing,” said the van’s doctor, watching him chatter with a patient in fluent Spanish. “He knows everybody, and they all know him.” The doctor, a European woman, has been part of the MedVan staff for a few months. When they walk down the street, she said, Wood stops on every block, just to say hello and check on someone he recognizes.

To see Wood interacting with his patients, it becomes clear why no one lies to him. While his voice is friendly, quiet and respectful, he almost never smiles. His clear blue eyes are soft and gentle, but his gaze never wavers, and his questions are direct and quick.

Wood is tight-lipped when it comes to his own background, but acknowledged he is a Vietnam veteran, and did social work in Gallup, N.M. and New York City before working in an emergency room. “I saw—and continue to see—a lot of people using the emergency room as their primary medical care,” he said. “I would see homeless guys come in, and a lot of those guys ended up dying because nobody paid attention to them or knew what they needed.” He attended a physician assistant program at Yeshiva University and joined Project Renewal’s MedVan shortly thereafter.

When it comes to his patients, Wood has much to say about the need for them to approach their health from a broader perspective. “Especially with a lot of these guys, medical problems are exacerbated by what’s going on in their lives,” he said. “I mean, if you’re living outside, that’s a tremendous amount of stress on your body.”

He said that one of the reasons he talks and mingles with his patients—and spends so much time listening—is that his approach to medicine involves gaining a well-rounded idea of their individual challenges and histories.

“The solution, when it comes to medicine, isn’t about solving one specific problem. It’s more like solving a puzzle,” he explained, gesturing with hands covered in ink from making notes. “Plus, a lot of these guys have some amazing stories.”