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Profile: Luisa Buada, hero of East Palo Alto, still active in health care after three decades

By Julie Chang
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From working with Cesar Chavez at the age of 19 to reviving struggling community health centers in at-risk neighborhoods throughout California, Luisa Buada always knew she would dedicate her life to social justice. Although her career has spanned three decades, the executive director of the Ravenswood Family Health Center in East Palo Alto has a sense of duty to her community that has never wavered.

In 1980, Buada opened her first community health center for migrant farmworkers in Salinas. Since then, Buada, 57, started three more community health centers in Watsonville, Berkeley and East Palo Alto and has contributed to the operations of several more.

But it's her work for the past nine years at Ravenswood that is widely viewed in health center circles as special. The establishment was on the brink of closing its doors to a struggling community when she took over in 2001. Today, as communities around the country celebrate National Health Center Week, local officials are commending the relentless efforts of their own hero.

"I've spent a long life in the world of business, and she is among the best chief executive officers that I've known," said Gordon Russell, a member of the board of directors for the Ravenswood center. "She is a good person and a friend. She has a personal quality that I admire. Luisa always says 'We can do it.'"

Buada, whose father was a Filipino farmworker and her mother a nurse, was raised with a sense of social awareness. She recalls her parents recounting their difficulty in obtaining a marriage license in a time when mixed-race unions were illegal. By the time she was 14, she had already campaigned for presidential candidate Robert Kennedy and for the rights of migrant workers in California. A few years later, her activism led her to work alongside United Farm Workers organizer Cesar Chavez.

Dedicated to tasks

After witnessing the poor health conditions among migrant workers, Buada spent the next decade becoming a nurse and a public health official in Monterey and studying

the health care system in Cuba. She was determined to improve medical care in at-risk communities.

"I worked with farmworkers because of the heritage of my father. I believed that America provided opportunities for people," said Buada, who now lives in Oakland. "I believed that everyone had the right to health care. It never occurred to me that it was a privilege. I never took no for an answer."

Her devotion to public health does not surprise Buada's sister, Karen Kavanagh, who recalls her younger sister's dedication — even as a child — to even the smallest tasks.

After a summer of reading Shakespearean plays, an 11-year-old Buada decided she would be British, Kavanagh said with a laugh. Not only did the girl diligently perfect an English accent, but she also carefully bookmarked an entire set of World Book Encyclopedias for all references to Great Britain.

"That just shows her tenacity," said Kavanagh. "If she really wants something, she will go for it. She will find something that will make it work. She's an organizer and that's what she's doing now."

Although Buada has shed her British accent, her voice and presence are front and center at Ravenswood, a 23-exam-room facility housed in a temporary building and nestled on a quiet road. With two locations and a mobile health unit, Ravenswood provides primary health care, mental health and chronic disease counseling as well as a brand-new dental facility, which Buada considers her proudest accomplishment.

Health care reform

While the executive director can be seen comfortably greeting the constant glut of patients in and around the facility, she considers the health center a constantly growing endeavor — especially now.

In the next five years, health care reform is slated to pump \$11 billion into community health centers, which provide health services to more than 2.5 million patients throughout California, according to the National Association of Community Health Centers. A refuge for the underinsured and uninsured, health centers such as Buada's expect their patients to double by 2015, when more individuals gain coverage.

Buada, who has already seen the number



(Lt.t to Rt.) 12-week-old Lisbeth Escobedo, is fed by Luisa Buada, Ravenswood... (Maria J. Avila)



(Foreground) Luisa Buada, Ravenswood Family Health Center Director, in the... (Maria J. Avila)

of patients at Ravenswood quadruple since 2001, plans to expand the center to include mammography, X-rays and twice as many exam rooms by 2012. She believes that, with reform, health centers will reduce the number of emergency room visits and associated costs.

"The kind of medicine we practice is the model of how health cost can be reduced by changing health behaviors," said Buada. "We provide access to those who have financial and language barriers which result in untreated conditions."

This year marks the 30th anniversary of Buada's work in community health care centers. Although she does not believe her career and her community health centers have been flawless over the years, both her colleagues and family still think highly of her lifetime efforts.

"She identifies with the people she serves," said Kavanagh. "She has the knowledge and vision to pull people together and provide services to those who wouldn't have them otherwise. I'm proud of her."



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