

## New Tangier health clinic to open Aug. 29

August 25, 2010

TANGIER -- On Aug. 29, the 500 or so residents of Tangier Island will celebrate the culmination of a long-time dream: the opening of a modern health center that replaces a decaying clinic that's more than 50 years past its prime.

The people of this shrinking strip of sand in the Chesapeake Bay -- Virginia's only inhabited island that's not reachable by bridge -- say they're stunned by the good will and donations from supporters far and wide.

"We had no idea we had so many friends," says Tangier native Inez Pruitt, who can trace her ancestry almost as far back as the island's colonization by the British in the late 1700s. "It's just overwhelmed them a lot. I mean people stop me in the road and it just brings them to tears."

Pruitt is a certified physician's assistant and the island's highest-ranking native medical professional ever. The daughter of Tangier's dock master, she is the protégé of Dr. David B. Nichols, a family physician who lives and practices medicine on the mainland in nearby White Stone. Pruitt had dropped out of high school before she began working for Dr. Nichols in the clinic. Over the next couple of decades, with his encouragement and her determination, she completed six years of formal medical training, all the while raising a family. Best of all, she brought her skills back home.

Dr. Nichols' love for Tangier dates back more than 30 years, when he, and occasionally other associated physicians, began flying to the island at least once a week to care for patients there. When the weather was too violent for flight, Nichols got there by boat, and risked his own safety at times by crossing in rough waters. His dedication and skill were rewarded on a national stage in 2006, when he was named "Country Doctor of the Year."

The \$1.4 million health center project was launched about six months before that, when Jimmie Carter, an Irvington developer and friend and patient of Dr. Nichols, flew with him to Tangier for lunch. A tour of the old clinic provoked an immediate response: Tangier residents desperately needed a new facility,

and Carter would head the effort to make it happen.

That was the beginning of the Tangier Island Health Foundation, which Carter chairs. In its first full year of operation, the foundation won a \$300,000 state grant, which was shepherded through Virginia's General Assembly -- without charge -- by McGuire-Woods Consulting of Richmond. The state grant and Dr. Nichols' subsequent Country Doctor of the Year award gave the project the cache and credibility it needed to attract numerous other public and private grants.


In the meantime, Carter enlisted the help of a lot of old friends in the area. All donated their professional services, including on-going legal work by attorney B.H.B. Hubbard, architectural design by William Darwin Prillaman, construction oversight by David Jones, and accounting work by Nancy Dykeman.

With its single schoolhouse, picket fences, and bicycles and golf carts as the main modes of transportation, life on Tangier seems a throwback to simpler times. The enduring spirit of its people is often cited as a big part of Tangier's charm.

The old clinic, despite its disrepair, never provoked much grumbling, because Tangierians aren't the type to complain, Pruitt says.

"We've always been very grateful for what we had," Pruitt says. "And we're ecstatic for what we're about to have."

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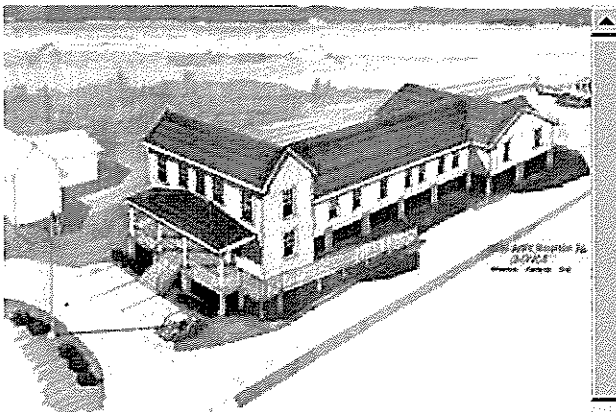
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By month's end, they'll be using a spacious, well-designed and well-equipped facility that's architecturally at home with the island's traditional buildings. New equipment includes digital X-ray, electronic medical records, a sophisticated treadmill for cardiac stress tests, and improved diagnostic tools that will prevent townspeople from having to leave the island for endoscopy procedures.

The excitement over the new clinic has been tempered in recent weeks by concern for Dr. Nichols, who was diagnosed last month with metastatic cancer that began as ocular melanoma six years ago. Though his doctors say he has about four to six months to live, Nichols has remained stoic. He says he is grateful for an abundant life spent among good people.

Last week, as he was returning from Tangier with his son Davey, who's been piloting him to the island since his diagnosis, Dr. Nichols says he was feeling a little down. He told his son he wished he could see everything through on Tangier. "Davey replied 'Dad, look at it this way. You're going out with a bang,'" Nichols says with a laugh. "And it's true, I'm so fortunate in so many ways."

"I feel blessed to be a part of Tangier," he adds. "They are family to me."



An artist's rendering of the new Tangier health clinic which will officially dedicated Aug. 29.

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