

Dr. Evelyn Schmidt

2009 Rotary Club of Durham Community Service Award

When I considered nominating someone for our Community Service Award this year, I thought about two things.

First, our motto—Service Above Self—and the tenets of our Four Way Test: truthfulness, fairness, good will, friendship, and beneficence.

Second, I thought about the previous winners of this award: the Rev. Ernie Mills of the Durham Rescue Mission; Kevin McDonald of TROSA; the Rev. Haywood Holderness; Dr. Jack Preiss, an advocate for fair housing for 50 years; and last year's recipient, the Rev. Joe Harvard.

So I began to think about another person who exemplifies those Rotary ideals—and it didn't take me long to think of someone to nominate.

This afternoon, I am honored present the woman who will join those five distinguished men as the recipient of our Community Service Award.

So many of you already know her, know her good works, and have even worked with her. However, her story is so

compelling and her record of service so inspiring that it is worth a few moments to share.

Dr. Evelyn Schmidt is a native of New Jersey who came south to Duke for her undergraduate and medical school training as a pediatrician. She once told a reporter that when she graduated in the 1950s she thought, "Thank you for a very good education, but I don't like your social and political philosophy."

Dr. Schmidt left the Jim Crow South and eventually ended up in New York working for the health department and practicing pediatrics at hospitals that served low-income, mixed populations. She became a pioneer in the field of social medicine, serving as chief of pediatrics at the Gouvenneur Ambulatory Care Center on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Then in 1970, Dr. Charles Watts and Dr. Donald Madison, a professor of Social Medicine at UNC, began to search for a director of the newly-funded Lincoln Community Health Center. Their search led them to Dr. Cecil Sheps of New York's Beth Israel Medical Center and a mentor of Dr. Schmidt's, who recommended her for the position. Thankfully for Durham, she agreed to return to the community she had left behind nearly twenty years earlier.

In an essay about Dr. Schmidt he wrote in 2003, Dr. Madison said this of her career: "She has been the director of the Lincoln Community Health Center for since 1971, which, if you know anything about the history of neighborhood health centers, should tell you that she has

weathered hurricanes and droughts and recessions and depressions and just about every other metaphorical and actual programmatic crisis one can imagine. Yet, to slightly alter the title of a Stephen Sondheim song, 'She's still here.'”

Remember that was six years ago—and she's still here, serving as the founding—and still only—Executive Director at Lincoln.

In a 2005 profile of Dr. Schmidt, The Independent wrote this:

“If Dr. Evelyn Schmidt is leading the way, any tour of the Lincoln Community Health Center in East Durham will be an educational experience. The tour will wind through the center's various clinics, past its smiling nurses and medical technicians and its stark, utilitarian examination rooms. You'll see bands of mostly poor, mostly uninsured folks sitting in gray waiting room chairs. There will be children hopping about and pregnant women rubbing their bellies. The tour will be brisk, for Schmidt, the center's executive director, is fleet of foot--a five-foot dynamo striding through the halls. And she talks even faster than she walks, especially when she's advocating for her patients.

“The tour might end in a big room on the center's first floor, where portraits and photographs line the walls. Schmidt will tell you how each depicted nurse, founder, board member or doctor helped make the center what it is today: a model for the way health care can and should be delivered to the poor. Despite all that, you'll have missed something essential. Tireless, devoted and modest, Schmidt won't tell you how her own leadership over the last 34 years has shaped

Lincoln into the exemplar it is. She'd rather give others the credit."

Many of you know about Lincoln, whose roots go back to Lincoln Hospital, where African-Americans in Durham went for health care during the days of segregation.

Today, it is a community health center that offers a wide range of services to a mostly uninsured population. Most Lincoln patients are African-American, 58 percent of the 34,000 served last fiscal year. Thirty percent were Hispanic. Of all patients served, 83 percent were at or below the poverty level, and 90 percent were uninsured. Many of them have chronic illnesses that grew from years of inadequate health care.

Dr. Schmidt says, "You cannot turn away people who are sick."

Over the years, she has shown the business savvy needed to increase medical services despite ever tightening budget constraints. She's navigated the bureaucracy of local health and medical care agencies to secure support. And she has stayed abreast of legislation and lobbied for adequate health-care policies at all levels of government.

In her office, amid the clutter of budget analyses, stacks of medical texts, and giant stuffed animals, she keeps a 3x5 index card with a Martin Luther King quote scribbled in her own handwriting. It reads, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhuman."

In those words, there's a clue to what drives Dr. Evelyn Schmidt.

Please join me in recognizing a tireless worker; an excellent administrator; a compassionate physician; and a passionate advocate—and the recipient of the 2009 Rotary Club of Durham's Community Service Award—Dr. Evelyn Schmidt.