

Hendersonville nurses Claire Burson, R.N., Barbara Garrison, RN, FNP and the oldest migrant health clinic in the United States

Across North Carolina, thousands of migrant farm workers follow the seasons and the crops to prepare soil, plant seeds and harvest fruits, vegetables, tobacco and Christmas trees. Their work often includes long, back-breaking hours, substandard housing and exposure to pesticides contributing to a variety of health problems. Henderson County fruit and vegetable growers have employed farm laborers for decades.

Claire Burson, born in 1909 in Pennsylvania and raised in New Jersey, spent most of her nursing career working in Aruba as a public health and Red Cross nurse. She and her husband retired to Hendersonville in the late 1950s and became involved in numerous community organizations. The plight of the local migrant farm workers caught her attention and she is credited with founding the Migrant Health Center clinic in 1961, the second migrant health clinic in the nation. The Center offered care three nights a week in a downtown Hendersonville store front. Staffed with dedicated volunteers, using donated supplies and improvised equipment, like the shower curtains used to separate examining rooms, the clinic served a vital function for migrant workers in the area. In addition to working in the free clinic, Burson and other volunteer health care professionals traveled to farms where migrants lived to provide care to those who were unable to access the clinic.

Many others were concerned about the health of migrant farm workers. Congress passed a bill, signed by President Kennedy in 1962 to fund Migrant Health Clinics across the country. Burson and her colleagues received one of the initial grants. This federal money put the clinic on solid footing with paid staff, up-to-date equipment and adequate supplies. In 1968 Burson estimated the volunteer physicians saw over 25 patients each night the clinic was open. By 1982, staffed by 3 nurse practitioners, the clinic was seeing about 1,000 migrants a year from 25-30 migrant camps in Henderson and Transylvania counties. After ten years as the Clinic director Burson retired and turned the position over to Barbara Garrison, RN, FNP, a University of North Carolina at Greensboro graduate and Henderson County native.

Under Garrison's leadership, in 1997 the Migrant Clinic became the Blue Ridge Community Health Center (BRCHS), a year-round health center serving all in need in the community. Under Starting with a family practice focus, pediatric care was added in 1992 and a school-based health center was funded in 1993. Today BRCHC provides medical, dental, mental health, pharmacy, nutritional, social work, nurse case management and educational services in Henderson, Buncombe, Polk, Haywood, Transylvania, Jackson, Swain, Rutherford and Macon counties.

The center continues to maintain a focus on the needs of migrant workers. It sponsored "Agricultural Appreciation day" in 2018 and noted in its press releases:

As the oldest migrant health clinic in the nation, Blue Ridge Health takes pride in working toward meeting the health-related needs of the farmworkers in our community. Consistent with the outreach work that we do throughout the agricultural season, we will conduct blood pressure

and blood glucose screenings among farmworkers, provide transportation to medical appointments. and also provide hats for sun protection to those that visit our main site on the 16th.

The vision and dedication of two North Carolina nurses, working with their colleagues and friends, has grown into an organization providing care for tens of thousands of residents each year in western North Carolina.