

By Suzanne Smith Dickinson

# Julio Bellber Taking the Health Care Mission One Step Further

Looking back on his 40 years in the community health center movement, Julio Bellber admits he may have been idealistic to endeavor so boldly. But endeavor he did and today Bellber is considered one of the trailblazers of the movement – and a fierce champion of its future.

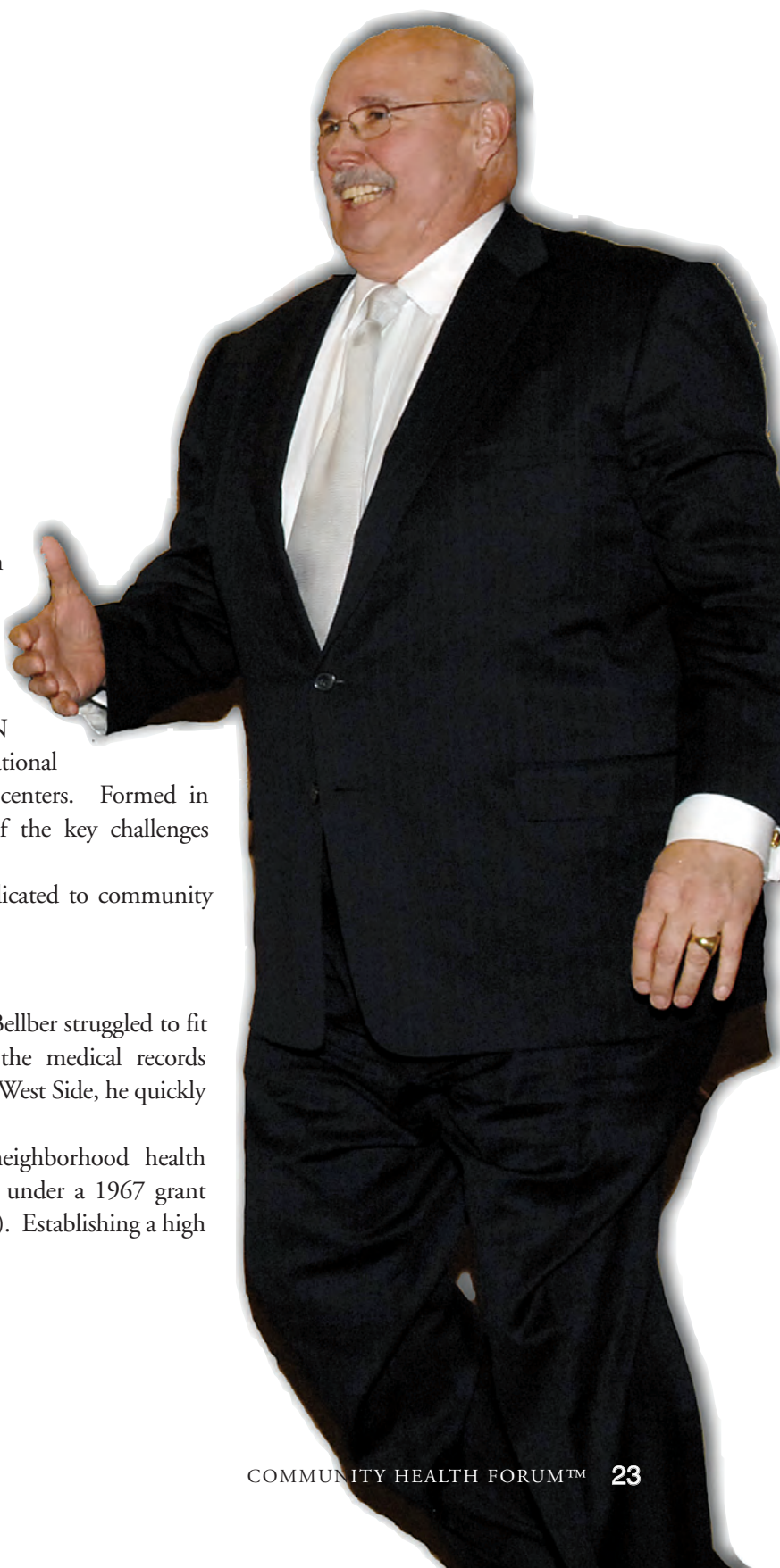
Bellber is the president and CEO of the RCHN Community Health Foundation (CHF) — the only national foundation devoted exclusively to community health centers. Formed in October 2005, the Foundation is addressing many of the key challenges community health centers have faced for decades.

Bellber, who has spent virtually his entire career dedicated to community health centers, knows those challenges well.

## **FINDING A FIT**

Coming to New York City from Puerto Rico at age 10, Bellber struggled to fit in. He began to find his niche when, working in the medical records department at St. Luke's Hospital on Manhattan's Upper West Side, he quickly became recognized for his exceptional abilities.

The hospital's leaders tapped Bellber for their neighborhood health program, one of the first demonstration clinics funded under a 1967 grant from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Establishing a high



quality medical home for the community became Bellber's passion.

Ten years later, in 1977, the Mid-Westside Neighborhood Health Council was spun out of the hospital as a separate not-for-profit corporation, and was renamed the William F. Ryan Community Health Center (Ryan). Bellber was named executive director of Ryan in 1979, overcoming resistance from federal officials to a non-health care professional assuming this leadership role.

Bellber's success established him as a powerful force in New York's community health care arena. He and the center's Board and staff worked through many trials to forge a superior health center.

"I credit our forward-thinking Board with the success of the health center," Bellber emphasizes. "Without them we never would have gotten as far as we did."

The 1980s were a period of significant growth for Ryan. With federal support and bank financing, Ryan became the first community health center in the country to negotiate with a private lending institution for its new facility, which opened on West 97th Street in 1988. That same year, at the request of the New York State's Attorney General and in consultation with federal officials, Ryan acquired under receivership the NENA Comprehensive Health Council on the Lower East Side and turned it around. NENA ultimately became a satellite of the Ryan Center and remains so to this day.

"My idealism frequently worked to my advantage," says Bellber. "I wasn't afraid to try things simply because no one had ever attempted them before." Bellber's approach was always to stay one step ahead.

In 1988, CenterCare was created (under the original name Manhattan Pre-Paid Health Services Plan, Inc.) through the efforts of Ryan and other Manhattan-based centers as one of New York state's first pre-paid health service plans, and the only one serving Manhattan. In 1993, the Ryan Community Health Network (RCHN) was established, which integrated the health centers, a management services organization and CenterCare. In 2001, Bellber spearheaded the development, financing, and opening of the Ryan/Chelsea-Clinton Community Health Center, serving the Midtown, Chelsea and Clinton neighborhoods. By 2004, RCHN had become the largest community health center network in the state.

### **A NEW VISION FOR ALL CENTERS**

Many of the issues that community health centers faced during the early years persist. Resource constraints, infrastructure needs, new requirements and, above all, the continuing need of the community for high quality, accessible health care are paramount concerns.

"The burden on community health centers has increased," says Bellber. "More and more health centers are the entry point into care for the underserved in this country." This casts into high relief the acute need to support health centers in innovative ways.

Empowered by his experience, Bellber contemplated ways to support and sustain all centers. The opportunity for a significant investment in the broader health center community came in 2005 with the sale of CenterCare. At that time, RCHN was



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reorganized, the health centers became self-governing, and a substantial portion of the sale proceeds went to form the nationally-focused RCHN Community Health Foundation, which builds on Bellber’s commitment to supporting community health centers.

“I felt that a component had been missing. I saw a huge opportunity for the Foundation to support health centers nationally,” Bellber says.

### **CURRENT INITIATIVES**

The RCHN Community Health Foundation focuses on initiatives to drive sustainable change for community health centers, concentrating on three areas: access, affordable pre-scripted drugs and health information technology (HIT). Through strategic investments and partnerships, the Foundation is helping to address health centers’ primary challenges.

“We want to engage partners who share our commitment,” says Bellber. “Our close relationship with the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) is a great example of the power of partnerships.”

The Foundation’s alliance with Community Health Ventures (CHV), NACHC’s business development affiliate, will help foster an expansion of CHV’s offerings to help centers operate more cost efficiently.

Another key initiative, the Geiger-Gibson/RCHN Community Health Foundation Research Collaborative, was established at George Washington University through a \$2 million gift from the Foundation. Its purpose is to advance health center-oriented policy research and scholarship. This collaborative recently produced a landmark study analyzing the effects of the Medicaid documentation requirements on community health centers and their patients.

On the health information technology front, RCHN Community Health Foundation has made a program-related investment in Chorus, a health care technology applications and services company focused exclusively on health centers.

### **AN EYE TO THE FUTURE**

Things change over time, but Bellber’s idealism is not one of them. After 40 years, Bellber has learned that taking risks and thinking beyond the norm are vital to success. “The opportunities to help community health centers better serve their patients are tremendous,” says Bellber.