

Opening the Door

Category: Behind Closed Doors

written by Jill Muhrer | April 9, 2021

Walking to the clinic, I pass a school where children gather in their crisp school uniforms. I admire their superhero lunchboxes, beaded purses, and colorful barrettes; I notice how tightly the younger children hold their older siblings' hands. Next I pass an abandoned church, with stained-glass windows that shine on a sunny day, with wildflowers and weeds covering its front yard, with its earth-colored stone walls.

Arriving at the clinic, I admire my patients' homes, standing out boldly among the drug houses. They are painted bright colors, and many have yards full of flowers and vegetables. One of my patients, in her bathrobe and slippers, is sweeping her front steps as her obese cat sits on the stoop, observing the scene and obviously not impressed. Even though she lives across the street from this clinic, she prefers to see me at the downtown office, so she can stop by McDonald's on her way. Where else can she get such a large meal for so little money? I suppress my worries: Is her blood sugar in the 400s? Is her blood pressure still elevated? Did she see her cardiologist? Instead, I chat with her about her cat and her ailing back and confirm her next appointment.

When I enter the office, I pass through the waiting room full of patients wearing colorful outfits, holding decorative canes, sitting in half-broken wheelchairs. In the exam room, I squint at the sunlight streaming through an opening above a boarded-up window.

It can be a challenge to work in this North Camden office because it is not my usual practice site, because I am just covering here for the day. I don't know the patients; at times, I feel like I'm just passing through—getting the patients through their visits. There is a big clock on the exam-room wall, placed there to promote productivity.

I cover the clock and turn on the computer. I open the exam-room door and call in my first patient.

But as I close the door behind us, time stands still. I am inspired by this neighborhood and, above all, by my patients. I remember that I'm there to listen to each patient, to offer them the best care that I can. Despite the time limitation, I get to know them as well as I can within the short span of their appointment, as they share their concerns with me.

It is an honor—one that I cherish.

Jill Muhrer

Lansdowne, Pennsylvania