

Honoring a Healthcare Visionary and Saying Farewell to a Founder

At the Community Foundation of Mendocino County, we often remind people that the money they donate will have a lasting effect, a legacy that continues long after they're gone.

I was thinking about this recently as I began working with MCHC Health Centers. MCHC provides medical, dental, and behavioral healthcare to people in Ukiah, Willits, and Lakeport. The organization has a wonderful culture of treating employees like family. That culture was developed, in large part, by their visionary founder, Linnea Hunter, who recently passed away after retiring several years ago.

Lin started Mendocino Community Health Clinic, now referred to as MCHC Health Centers, in 1992 when Mendocino County could no longer afford to provide outpatient healthcare as it had done for decades. Under Lin's leadership, MCHC expanded, adding health centers in Willits and Lakeport, which brought millions of dollars to the region through federal funding and capital grants, and eventually allowed for the treatment of more than five hundred patients per day, many of whom were poor, elderly, or underserved for other reasons.

People who knew Lin often speak of her vision and her willingness to forge ahead when others were afraid. Her career in healthcare began as a lay midwife in the 1970s, giving women a more natural path to childbirth than was available in the hospitals of the day. She went on to start the Potter Valley Community Health Center with her husband at the time, Ross Ritter. By the early 1990s, she understood the importance of government funding in providing healthcare for vulnerable populations, and she was instrumental in attaining the designations MCHC required to receive funding from Medi-Cal and Medicare.

Lin had a reputation for adopting new approaches to healthcare before others fully understood the value they represented, including the transition to electronic health records and the patient-centered medical home. She could be powerful and passionate—even intimidating—when she advocated for healthcare services for the poor and underrepresented, but those closest to her say she was a softie at heart. Apparently, she would do just about anything to help people out.

Lin's successor, CEO Carole Press said, "Lin impacted a lot of people's lives, and since her passing, people have been asking about how to honor her. This scholarship fund felt like the right approach. It allows people to make a tax-deductible donation and keeps her giving nature alive."

An important part of the scholarship fund will be the fact that it encourages donations from current employees as well as the general public. In fact, MCHC will not only provide seed money to start the fund, but also match employee donations every year. Carole explained how Lin would often help employees on matters that had nothing to do with their work at the health center. This is part of why the scholarship doesn't limit recipients to those pursuing health care. "When people follow their heart and do what they love, they can help the community in other ways," Carole explained.

MCHC asked for the Community Foundation's help in administering the scholarship and the employee giving program because the Foundation knows how to manage these types of funds, keeping everything legal and assuring a fair and objective scholarship selection process.

In recent years, several organizations have said goodbye to their founders—MCHC, the Mendocino Coast Clinics, the Cancer Resource Centers of Mendocino County, First 5 Mendocino, and even our own Community Foundation. While it's exciting to see how new leaders will take those organizations into the future, when founders leave it can be difficult to say goodbye. By creating a scholarship fund, MCHC has found a unique way to give back in the spirit of its founder, with the people of the organization honoring her memory, now and into the future.