

La Clinica

BY Dr Emily Hartzog



The parking lot of Camping World was overwhelming with its rows and rows of Recreational Vehicles of all shapes and sizes. I knew that I needed an RV large enough to have a bedroom with a closing door, and I knew I needed an old one because I couldn't afford anything else. Other than that, I knew nothing about RV's. I had come to look at them with a project in mind that had been ten years in the making.

I first had the idea when I practiced gynecology in Colorado. Francisco Castillo managed our farm there. He taught me

Spanish, everything I know about animals, and as much as he could about his Latino community. I learned how expensive it was for them to see a doctor and how difficult it was to communicate once you were there. When I researched it further, I found that Latina women were 30% less likely to have ever had a pap smear here and had the highest incidence of cervical cancer in the country.

One of my primary goals with practicing medicine had always been to try to fill in the gaps in healthcare. Previously, in New Mexico, I'd worked with Native Americans on a project encouraging them to resume their tradition of breastfeeding and turn away from the formula many of them mistakenly thought was better. In Colorado, I'd started a rural practice in an underserved area where I was the only OB/GYN within a fifty-mile radius. The idea of changing an RV into a mobile clinic and going on the road to provide free women's health care and target the Spanish speaking population was very exciting, but it never quite came to fruition.

When I moved to upstate New York in 2010, I was more determined than ever and had enough money to move forward. In my search for statistics in the Hudson Valley, I found a paper titled 'Healthcare of Recent Immigrants in Dutchess County'. I made some phone calls and was put in touch with one of the authors, a Nutritionist named Solange Muller. She confirmed that a mobile van would solve some of the problems the Latina women had with transportation and volunteered to help me with the project. Since her Spanish was perfect and mine was improving, we also thought we could help with the language barrier, which was the second biggest problem found in the study.

At Camping World, I picked out a charming Bounder RV that had been lovingly maintained by an older couple. Taking out the bed and installing an exam table seemed daunting until they assured me it was possible by moving everything in and out through the back window rather than down the narrow hallways. After only a few weeks, it was ready, but now the challenge was actually driving a 34 foot vehicle on the highway.

Needless to say, we made it home intact. My husband Jack and I spent the next few months figuring how to operate the electricity, the doors, the step, the awning, and the slide-out room. Even things like pumping the gas, flushing the toilets, and where to put the hose to replenish the water supply weren't obvious.

My partner Solange was invaluable when it came to patient outreach. She'd been active in the Latino community for many years and had connections all over the Hudson Valley. We had meetings to decide on our target towns, and I started investigations about who might have a parking lot large enough and would host a 34 foot Bounder so we could see patients there.

Our home base was behind the Migliorelli farm stand in Red Hook. Ken Migliorelli had also been generous enough to let us park the RV on his farm when it wasn't being used. We set up on a grassy lawn, pulled out the awning, and put a table and chairs outside. It was my idea of heaven.

The patients came filtering in, and the Bounder was filled with beautiful Spanish and the sounds of laughter. Solange brought out her Nutrition education materials and taught us about good dietary habits. There were people seated on the sofas, chairs, and even on the driver's seat inside. We were all so happy to be there; me most of all.

Over the course of the four years that we ran La Clinica, we went to Red Hook, Pine Plains, Hudson, and Wappingers Falls. I cannot thank the people enough who helped me with this project, and there were many of them. I was overjoyed when one day a patient joked that she thought we'd seen everyone who needed us in Red Hook. That would have been my dream for all the towns we visited.

I started a solo practice in Rhinebeck in September of 2017 and decided I could more easily continue the work of La Clinica in a fixed space. Now the equipment doesn't shift every time someone opens the door and I don't have to pay a driver.

I want to continue to provide free care when it is needed, and I hired a bilingual receptionist Dazaly Reyes so I can hear Spanish every day. We're eager to recreate the magic of La Clinica and look forward to having a waiting room full of laughter.

My website is eharzogmd.com.