

# DOCTORS

who make a difference

FOR SIX MONTHS, WE HAVE BEEN ASKING OUR READERS AND MEMBERS OF THE NJ MEDICAL COMMUNITY to share stories about “Doctors Who Make a Difference.” We wanted to learn about doctors’ under-the-radar efforts that are improving their communities and the lives of their patients on very personal levels — and recognize them for their efforts. ¶

Wow! The flood of mail we received! Our office was inundated with tales of philanthropic professionals whose efforts are changing lives — in addition to saving them. We learned about physicians whose compassion made difficult times for patients more manageable — acts of kindness and determination that resonated with our readers. We discovered doctors who put their patients’ well-being first to

extraordinary extents, doctors who readers wrote were “the answer to their prayers.” ¶ The one thing we learned in reporting on these “Doctors Who Make a Difference” is this: New Jersey not only boasts some of the top doctors in the nation — they are also professionals dedicated to making our state and our individual lives significantly better. ¶

*Here are some of their stories.*

by Patti Verbanas  
additional reporting by Liz Donovan



*Dana Holwitt (right) with fellow breast surgeons Marcie Hertz (l) and Nancy Elliott (c), director of the Montclair Breast Center.*

## Dana Holwitt:

THE DOCTOR-TURNED-PATIENT

When breast surgeon Dana Holwitt, MD, came face-to-face with frightened newly diagnosed breast cancer patients, she found a very personal way to comfort them – she took off her wig. Holwitt, who has practiced at Montclair Breast Center since 2008, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009, at just 36 years

old and only 6 months after her mother had finished chemotherapy. She found hope in talking to patients who had finished their treatment and were able to share their experiences with her. “I needed emotional support and inspiring stories, like any other person who is diagnosed with breast cancer,” she says. “I got as much from my patients as I was able to give.”

Later, she was likewise able to use her personal story

to help other women through their diagnosis and treatment. “I went to medical school and memorized a lot of things, but there is a lot that happens to your body during chemotherapy that you can’t read about in a book. You have to experience it to understand it,” she says.

Holwitt had initially planned to follow in her father’s footsteps as a cardiac surgeon. But while completing her residency, she found that she enjoyed working with breast

cancer patients during the clinical rotation. “I realized that it’s one of the only specialties that allows you to have a long-term relationship with your patients,” she says. “When you take care of breast cancer patients, they’re yours for life.”

The final factor was that several of her friends were diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age. “There was a bit of fate involved that helped push me into the right specialty,” she says. “Who knew it would end up

saving my life?”

Now, more than a year out of treatment and doing well, Holwitt educates women about the importance of mammograms and aims to offer a message of hope to her patients. “I want to let women know that there is life after breast cancer. I am a breast surgeon but I’m also a breast cancer survivor,” she says. “This happened to me, but it doesn’t define who I am. I’m also a sister, a daughter, and a friend.” –Liz Donovan

COMPASSIONATE CARETAKERS

**DEBORAH NEIMAN**

There is no stronger patient testimonial for a doctor who has made a difference than this one written about Deborah Neiman, MD: “I am here today because of her diagnosis.” A number of readers wrote in to commend Neiman, an internist at Somerset Medical Center, for her Step Ahead weight-loss center in Bedminster and the special care she takes with patients. “Even if she is busy and behind,” one patient says, “she stops and takes time out for you.”

**MARCEL FAVETTA**

“It is a rarity to find a doctor who has such a professional yet jovial personality these days,” wrote Paula Bertagna of Franklin Park. “I will remain under his care always knowing that I will be treated with respect and kindness no matter the issue.” Bertagna’s sentiment was repeated in the droves of mail we received for Marcel Favetta, MD, of the Branchburg Center for Women’s Health, which praised him as much for his warmth as for the time he devotes to his patients during visits.

**LARRY WEINSTEIN**

Compassion is a similar hallmark in the practice of Larry Weinstein, MD, of Weinstein Plastic Surgery Center in Chester. We received volumes of letters from his patients, commending him for his humanity while treating them. Virginia Papa of Long Valley told us how she had selected Weinstein for a breast augmentation, when, she says, “My life took an unexpected turn: I learned that I had breast cancer and would require a double mastectomy. Dr. Weinstein spent such a great deal of time preparing me mentally and physically. His dedication to helping me overcome the emotional

scars of breast cancer turned what could have been the worst period of my life into the best possible scenario.” Amy Langdo’s comments epitomizes those of her fellow patients: “Dr. Weinstein truly cares about his patients — you can see it in his eyes.”

**TODD MORROW**

To patients who lack sufficient insurance, Todd Morrow, MD, of West Orange is an answer to their prayers: He routinely provides urgent and emergent ENT care to such patients at the Burn Center at St. Barnabas, Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, St. Michael’s Medical Center, and Short Hills Surgery Center. His pro bono work does not stop there: He also treats victims of domestic violence, regardless of their ability to pay, through the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery’s National Domestic Violence Project.

**RICHARD JERMYN**

Richard Jermyn, DO, director of the Neuro-Musculoskeletal Institute at the UMDNJ School of Osteopathic Medicine, Stratford, rose to the national spotlight when he suggested that a 19-year-old amateur musician suffering from a traumatic head injury make music as part of her therapy. The life-changing suggestion catapulted the then-unknown Melody Gardot to international fame as a Grammy-nominated jazz/blues singer-songwriter. But Jermyn’s good works preceded these headlines: Since 1999, he has offered his expertise as director and founder of the Comprehensive Pain Center at Garden State Infectious Diseases in Voorhees, which provides pain management to patients infected with HIV/AIDS (free for those without insurance).

**SUSAN BAUMAN AND KATHRYN PEPER**

Although most doctors’ compassionate

acts go unrecognized in any formal way, some have been lauded by state organizations: Susan Bauman’s (MD, Hunterdon Medical Center) work as a champion for quality-of-life care has earned her the recognition of Hospice Physician of the Year by the New Jersey Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. And Ginger Gavin of the Visiting Nurse Association of Northern New Jersey told us her organization has honored Kathryn Peper, MD, who practices internal medicine at Morristown Memorial and Overlook Hospital, as a Physician of the Year due to her “passion, dedication, and caring approach that she extends to her patients.”

COMMUNITY LEADERS

**GREGORY HIRSCH**

There were no doctors who received more glowing nominations from community leaders than Gregory Hirsch, MD, an OB/GYN in Hillsborough. Fran Palm, executive director of The Women’s Health & Counseling Center in Somerville, expressed her heartfelt thanks for Hirsch’s decade of work with her organization, which offers health services for women without insurance. “He gives his time without hesitation to assist in training our staff in procedures and consults on difficult cases as needed,” she says of Hirsch, who also serves on the Center’s Medical Advisory Board. “He is a loyal supporter of the agency and shares our concern for our patients.” Hirsch also has been an active supporter of the Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children in Bridgewater since 2002. “In addition to monetary gifts, he has donated his time and talents to help abused and neglected teenagers in New Jersey,” says Jeffrey Fetzko, executive director. And

“Robert Tassan [medical oncologist, Valley Hospital] is personable and straightforward, which carries a lot of weight when you are diagnosed with cancer. He remembers that you used to have long, curly hair, not a bad wig on your head. Not only has he had a positive impact on me, but he also saved my life.”  
—Tara Cullen, Ramsey



David Laskow, director of Kidney and Pancreas Transplant Surgery at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson, knows intimately the meaning of second chances. In 2005, the organ transplant surgeon received a heart transplant after suffering a massive heart attack. This bond with his patients affords Laskow an empathy earned by “one who’s been there.” Pre-med student Lindsay Robinson, who shadowed Laskow for a summer, told us how she was “blown away by his care and generosity.” She says, “The story of his own transplant is so inspirational; patients are immediately put at ease.”

to the core: He initiated the Bradley Beach Walking Club to promote a healthy lifestyle, is involved in a local effort to make the beaches handicapped-accessible, and conducts skin-cancer checks on the boardwalk. Not afraid to get his feet wet, Cotler can often be spotted wading through the Sylvan Lake, pulling garbage out of the water. His efforts have one goal, as stated by local resident Marilyn Rosen: “To make our town a better place to live.”

#### ARTHUR J. TORRE

New Jersey asthma sufferers have long been breathing a bit easier due to the work of Arthur J. Torre, MD, co-chair of the Pediatric/Adult Asthma Coalition of New Jersey. In 1993, he mobilized parents and school officials to promote legislation that made New Jersey one of the first states to allow students to carry their inhalers. More recently, he led the coalition to initiate the Asthma Friendly School Award Program. He helped create asthma videos for school personnel and nurses and was instrumental in the development of an innovative Asthma Treatment Plan, which is now used statewide to educate asthma sufferers on how to recognize when their asthma is getting worse and how to bring it under control. When not educating, Torre can be found submerged, practicing “dive medicine.” His work has been important in the creation of guidelines that allow asthma patients who are “controlled” be able to scuba dive.

#### MICHAEL GERARDI

According to Trish O’Keefe, RN, chief nursing officer at Morriston Memorial Hospital, “The world could use more community advocates like Michael Gerardi.” Gerardi, the hospital’s director of Pediatric Emergency Medicine, assisted the United Way of Morris County in developing the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed program (ALICE) to study low- and middle-income populations to find ways to help them succeed with dignity; he remains an advocate for ALICE families. Gerardi is also a leader for the United Way’s Caregiver Coalition, which helps improve support systems and access to resources for those caring for aging, ill, or disabled loved ones.

Hirsch’s contributions to Somerset Medical Center’s blood donor program prompted phlebotomist Julianna Manrique to write: “What’s better than a physician knowing the importance of ordering a unit of blood and replacing it? Dr. Hirsch has been giving blood to our program since 2002; he comes in every 56 days and has given nearly three

gallons. He also encourages his staff to participate, and together they have donated a total of seven gallons.”

#### HAROLD COTLER

Harold Cotler, DO, of Cotler Family Practice in Bradley Beach and Jersey Shore University Medical Center is a community man



**Frank Forte:**

NOTES OF  
COMPASSION

He's jammed at loft parties with the legendary tuba soloist Howard Johnson and played Harlem's Apollo Theater with guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli. But it was his relationship with jazz great Dizzy Gillespie that earned Frank Forte the sobriquet "Dr. Jazz." Forte was the oncologist at Englewood Hospital who treated Gillespie for pancreatic cancer, and before he died of the disease in 1993, the jazzman asked his doctor for a life-changing favor: "Promise," he requested, "you'll help musicians less fortunate than I am."

Forte – a jazz guitarist himself – knew that many players in the jazz community

worked for the love of their music with only modest compensation and, often, no health insurance. So, in 1994 he established the Dizzy Gillespie Memorial Fund at Englewood Hospital, offering free medical care to poor or uninsured jazz musicians.

Over the past 16 years, Forte – with help from a team of medical specialists, all of them working pro bono – has treated more than 1,000 musicians through the hospital and its Dizzy Gillespie Cancer Institute.

Though working for the Institute hasn't earned him a penny, Forte's derived an even greater benefit: an insider's knowledge of the jazz community.

"I've learned a lot more about jazz," he says gratefully. "Not the music, but the people."

The Gillespie Memo-

rial Fund recently extended coverage to musicians in need of screening for prostate, skin, and other cancers, and, Forte says, "We've already found people who didn't know they had cancer and begun treating them." Known for his bedside manner and his dedication to treating all of his patients with dignity, Forte donates his earnings from jazz gigs to the Gillespie Fund. Like his patients, he isn't in it for the money but for the sheer joy of music-making. "When you're playing," he says, "you really can't think about all the things that are bothering you."

And thanks to Forte, ill health is less of a bother to scores of area jazz musicians, who can now spend more of their time making the music they love.

—Leslie Garisto Pfaff

**OTTAVIO NEPA**

Ottavio Nepa, DC, Atlas Chiropractic Center, Woodland Park, is on a life-saving crusade, making "house calls" at local restaurants to teach wait staffs and customers how to save choking victims. Upon hearing about his initiative, Dr. Heimlich himself wrote to Nepa to commend him for his work.

**WILLIAM A. TANSEY III**

This cardiologist at Summit Medical Group takes his job and community, well, to heart. His philanthropic contributions have earned him the 2006 Ellis Island Medal of Honor, the 2009 Betty McAllister Award for Volunteerism from the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the 2009 Millburn-Short Hills Volunteer First Aid Squad's Lifetime Membership Award, the American Heart Association's Community Outreach Award, and the Liberty Science Center's 2010 "Volunteer Extraordinaire" honor.

FINDING SOLUTIONS,  
CHANGING LIVES

**JOSEPH D. SALAMONE**

For most doctors, solving mysteries and restoring lives is all in a day's work – but these accomplishments can mean a rebirth to patients who are suffering. We received volumes of mail from readers about how Joseph D. Salamone, DC, of Fairfield identified their pain symptoms as being caused by Lyme disease. The chiropractor's persistence led to their diagnosis and successful treatment. To further education, Salamone started the West Essex Lyme Support Group.

**SAAD HABBA**

Saad Habba, MD, gastroenterologist at Overlook Hospital, is another doctor who is known for solving a medical mystery. By discovering an association between chronic diarrhea and a dysfunctional gallbladder, he has dramatically changed the lives of people who have been barely able to leave their homes due to digestive problems. After discussing this rarely diagnosed condition (Habba Syndrome) on Discovery Health's *Mystery Diagnosis*, many viewers finally received the treatment they needed.

“Rafael Pajaro [Summit Medical Group] takes a back-to-basics approach that is so refreshing in this ‘assembly line doctor’ world. Although this may not seem extraordinary on the surface, it is. His dedication is a rarity.”

—Kim Williams, Randolph

#### **JENNIFER A. LAROSA**

Jennifer A. LaRosa, MD, Director of the Intensive Care Unit at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, has earned admiration for her work in improving end-of-life care in the ICU. We also learned how her other initiatives have significantly decreased the instance of death in ICU patients suffering from sepsis.

#### **MARK R. MCLAUGHLIN**

Mark R. McLaughlin, MD, Medical Director of Princeton Brain & Spine Care, is on a teaching mission. Besides publishing more than 100 articles on neurosurgery and spine surgery and two textbooks on spine surgery, he edits spineuniverse.com, which educates physicians and patients on spinal disorders. In 2000, he initiated the first-ever Russian-American Spine Symposium in St. Petersburg, Russia; in 2010, he returned to Russia to train another generation of neurosurgeons on approaches to the cervical spine.

#### **MATTHEW CLOTT**

Lynette King Davis told us how Matthew Clott, MD, a plastic surgeon who specializes in hand surgery at Raritan Bay Medical Center, dramatically changed the life of talented Perth Amboy High School wrestler Eric Perez, who nearly lost his hand in an accident. One year after Clott's reconstructive surgery to reattach 13 tendons in his hand and wrist, Perez returned to wrestling and won his first match. Of Perez's performance, his coach, Mike Giordano, told the *Home News Tribune*, “It's a miraculous recovery.” \*

## Going the Extra Mile

DOCTORS OUR READERS LOVE

Extraordinary compassion and a sense of humanity in a world where patients often feel they are “just a number” were the overriding themes in the stories told about the doctors who are listed below. From doctors who made house calls to those who worked tirelessly to help patients navigate an often-confusing route to diagnosis and treatment, these professionals have gone above and beyond to improve our readers' quality of life.



*Erol Veznedaroglu (“Dr. Vez”), MD, Capital Health's Director of Neurosciences and Cerebrovascular & Endovascular Neurosurgery.*

**Stephen Bobella**, MD, internal medicine, Paramount Medical Group, Warren.  
**Donald Brock**, MD, Diagnostic Clinical Cardiology, West Orange.  
**Romeo A. Caballes**, MD, Branchburg Internal Medicine.  
**Michael Carbone**, DC, Total Health Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Center, Florham Park.  
**Leonard Carlucci**, DC, Jersey City.  
**Frank Castello**, MD, Director, Children's Specialized Hospital - New Brunswick.  
**Anthony Catanese**, MD, urology, Somerset Medical Center.  
**William Charschan**, DC, Charschan Chiropractic and Sports Injury Associates, North Brunswick.  
**James Chimenti**, MD, neurosurgery, Somerset Medical Center.

**Herbert Dardik**, MD, Englewood Hospital and Medical Center.  
**Alfred Davis Jr.**, DC, Davis Chiropractic Health & Wellness Center, Montclair.  
**Martin Diamond**, MD, Director of Outpatient Services, Children's Specialized Hospital - Mountainside.  
**Kathleen Dowling**, MD, internal medicine, Wall Twp.  
**Peggy Eicher**, MD, Medical Director, Center for Pediatric Feeding and Swallowing Disorders, St. Joseph's Children's Hospital.  
**Michele Fantasia**, MD, Pediatrics and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Children's Specialized Hospital - Mountainside.  
**Stuart J. Fischer**, MD, orthopedic surgeon, Overlook Hospital.  
**Mildred Frantz**, MD, family practice, HealthCare for Life, Oakhurst.  
**John Gregg**, DO, family practice, Allied Medical Associates,

Wayne. **Robert Haley**, DC, Haley Chiropractic, Lyndhurst.  
**Tami Hartman**, DC, Family Chiropractic Center, Lake Hopatcong.  
**Jeffrey Hofman**, OB/GYN, Princeton.  
**Joseph Hudak**, DC, Edison.  
**Melvin Katz**, MD, North Brunswick Pediatrics.  
**Aldo Khoury**, MD, Director, St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center Perinatal Center and Perinatal Services of Northern New Jersey, Wayne.  
**Beaula Koduri**, MD, Hematology Oncology Consultants, South Plainfield.  
**Stanley M. Kozakowski**, MD, Director, Hunterdon Family Practice Residency Program, Hunterdon Medical Center.  
**Jack Lee**, MD, Somerset Pulmonary & Sleep Medicine Center, Bridgewater.  
**George Logothetis**, MD, cardiology, Cranbury Heart and Lung Associates, Monroe Twp.

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 MORE DOCTORS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

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