

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## Making History: Money plays no role for this doctor

Health care with dignity means equal access for all children

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By **CHERIE BLACK**  
P-I REPORTER

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

Decades later, at the Odessa Brown Children's Clinic, Dr. Ben Danielson is working to make sure that doesn't happen here, that Seattle children receive the best possible health care, no matter their financial or family situation.

"Quality care with dignity" is the motto of the Central District clinic, where Danielson, 43, is medical director. The clinic has served mostly poor and uninsured children since 1970, now offering dental, mental health and medical services and special programs for children with sickle cell disease, asthma, school underachievement and obesity.

Danielson, also a pediatrician at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center, believed early on that medicine was more than just taking care of the physical -- that social issues, mental issues and family issues also must be addressed. He looks to the clinic as a standing legacy for his patients.

"Odessa Brown was a single mom like my mom and fought for health care for children in the Central District," Danielson said. "This place is built on the shoulders of strong women, and the younger versions of these same strong women are working here."

Danielson's early interest in science came from his mother, Jude, a forester in Oregon he describes as a wandering soul -- part scientist, part ecologist and part hippie. He was adopted as a baby and lived in Bolivia while his mother was in the Peace Corps, learning Spanish as his first language. She raised him and his two sisters in Washington, D.C., mainly on her own, and, Danielson said, never really decided what she was going to be when she grew up.

After medical school at the University of Washington, he completed his residency training at Children's Hospital, which "jelled the value of being connected to a person and a family," he said.

He worked in small towns throughout Washington, where he learned he couldn't detach social issues from medical issues and everything had an effect on his patient's well-being.

He became medical director of Odessa Brown in 1999 and has incorporated the sense of complete care with every patient he sees.

"We think creatively about care and can build programs to support the whole life of a child," he said. "The person who works with kids at Odessa Brown is in the communities where these kids live and goes beyond



 Paul Joseph Brown / P-I

Dr. Ben Danielson, the medical director of Odessa Brown Children's Clinic since 1999, examines 12-week-old Kaveh Swartzman with his father, Aaron Swartzman.

health care. It's just how you do it."

He admires his patients, families he describes as a combination of resilience, struggle, strife and champions. Sixty percent of his patients are African American, 85 percent are on Medicaid. The obstacles families overcome to just make it to the clinic can be vast -- transitional housing, taking care of foster children, phone numbers good for two, maybe three weeks.

"Our health care system is not designed to be friendly to you," Danielson said. "But every child deserves to have care."

Paola Maranan, executive director for Children's Alliance, where Danielson also serves on the board of directors, said Danielson understands children's health needs, but also wants them to have a community. She said he has broadened his role and has become the very best advocate for the children as well as the best pediatrician.

"He's an advocate for all kids and is involved with each child as an individual and collectively advocates for the thousands in need at a time," Maranan said. "We get a real sense from his practice at the clinic what the children need."



Paul Joseph Brown / P-I

Danielson plays peekaboo to help calm a scared child before her exam. Danielson also works at Children's Hospital.

Danielson considers the physicians, surgeons and nurses who taught him while he was an intern his heroes. He also credits his high school basketball coach and his 90-year-old grandmother, Hope Tower, who lives on her own in Sarasota, Fla.

But he especially admires those who came before him, those he doesn't even know -- the strong African Americans, especially women, who paved the way for his path to come through Seattle. Someone such as Blanche Lavizzo, the clinic's first medical director.

"I feel like I need to live up to her expectations," Danielson said.

State Health Officer Maxine Hayes believes Lavizzo would be proud, noting his devotion to following the clinic's motto of providing care with dignity. The pair worked together on the Children's Health Access Task Force, analyzing the benefits of providing health insurance coverage and access to uninsured children.

"As a baby boomer, my time is running out. I've had my chance to change the world," she said. "As an African American man, he clearly understands the racism and all the other 'isms' we have to take out of the last bastion of health. As I pass the torch on, he can take that torch and run with it."

King County Executive Ron Sims, whose office initiated the task force, calls Danielson a practitioner and facilitator who has earned a high level of trust from the community and understands all aspects of the health care system.

"He sees challenges and doesn't think they're so formidable the people can't be helped," Sims said. "He can recenter people on the patient goal and break down the walls."

Danielson gives patients his pager number so they can get an answer immediately, not during the next available appointment time.

He notes 5.6 percent of the area's children are African American, but fewer than 1 percent of physicians are.

"Medicine has to take care of itself by promoting futures, being mentors and encouraging young people to achieve," he said. "You have to not only be an advocate, but also an activist."

He and his wife of one year, Kim Graves-Danielson, live in Madrona, a mile and a half from the clinic.

He splits his time between working at Children's and working at the clinic, as well as finding time for numerous boards and volunteer work.

"My vision for health care is everybody can come to the same place and get the right care for them," he said. "I'd be happy to retire from Odessa Brown way too old. The work there is such a privilege."

It is quality care -- with dignity.

## **ABOUT THIS SERIES**

As part of Black History Month coverage, the Seattle P-I is running a series of profiles of African Americans in the Seattle area who are making a difference. Today we feature Dr. Ben Danielson.

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