

# A TRADITION OF CARE

FOR 15 YEARS,  
DUQUESNE'S SPIRIT  
OF HEALTH INITIATIVE  
HAS HELPED LOCAL  
RESIDENTS LIVE  
HEALTHIER AND  
BETTER LIVES

*By Mark C. Toth*





**K**ristin Cirbus knows a simple act of kindness not only makes someone else feel good, it may also help improve their health.

The sixth-year Duquesne pharmacy student was treating a patient with diabetes during Duquesne’s annual Health & Wellness Fair. She discovered the man needed more than the test strips he couldn’t afford to purchase—he also needed a hot meal.

“We were testing this patient’s blood glucose levels, and while he knew that he is diabetic, he wasn’t aware that his blood sugar levels were three times higher than what is considered normal,” remembers Cirbus.

The patient confided that he sometimes didn’t take his medicine because he didn’t have enough money for food, which he needed to take with his insulin. So, Cirbus and the other Duquesne student pharmacists staffing the event bought him breakfast so he could take his medication.

“I’ll probably never forget that moment,” says Cirbus. “Providing one meal made such a difference to him.”

Making a difference to Pittsburgh residents in need is at the heart of Duquesne’s Spirit of Health Initiative, which—for 15 years—has focused on community outreach that provides basic health care or medical tests to people who may not have access to those services.

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“Our Spirit of Health Initiative has a primary goal: providing access to quality health care right in the neighborhoods of those in need,” says Suzanne Higginbotham, B.S., Pharm.D., BCACP, director of the Duquesne University Pharmacy and Center for Pharmacy Care.

Starting in their third year of studies, as part of their community-engaged learning experience, all Duquesne pharmacy students are required to go out into neighborhoods and work with the Spirit of Health Initiative.

“Over the years, the Spirit of Health Initiative has built up a bank of community partners in Pittsburgh neighborhoods where income levels are low, poverty levels are high, or where quality health care is limited or lacking,” explains Higginbotham.

In 2015-2016, the student pharmacists conducted 4,371 health screenings at locations across the city.

The Spirit of Health Initiative originated in 2002 as a partnership with the Sisters of St. Francis congregation in Pittsburgh’s Millvale neighborhood. Travelling in a van, pharmacy students, staff pharmacists and sisters—many of whom were trained in nursing or other health fields—provided patients in local communities with screenings for diabetes, high blood pressure, blood glucose, hypertension and other conditions. They also assisted with follow-up referrals and shared information about proper nutrition and health advice.

While the Center for Pharmacy Care no longer collaborates directly with the Sisters of St. Francis, the congregation endowed Duquesne with \$500,000 and the van to continue helping the underserved. And earlier this year, the Duquesne University Pharmacy received a \$46,000 grant from McAuley Ministries—established by the Sisters of Mercy to be of service to the poor, sick and uneducated—to provide free medication to elderly patients in need and to expand outreach programs in Pittsburgh’s Hill District community.

Through this grant, McAuley Ministries has enabled Duquesne students to work directly with more patients, while reflecting on the University’s mission of caring for those in local communities.

“Being a part of the Spirit of Health Initiative and serving underserved populations has opened my eyes that people need help, whether or not they can afford the services,” says Cirbus. “And that’s truly what health care is about.” ♦

## NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR LOCAL OUTREACH

Earlier this year, Duquesne’s School of Pharmacy was one of six pharmacy schools awarded a scholarship for excellence in education from the National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS) Foundation.

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**Photos 1-5:** Duquesne student pharmacists bring the Spirit of Health Initiative to a health fair in Pittsburgh's Market Square.

**Photo 6:** Pharmacy students and staff at the Duquesne University Pharmacy, located in the Hill District.

**Photo 7:** Students gather for flu shots and health screenings in the Duquesne Union.