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Cook: Franklin's Mercy Children's Clinic has aged most gracefully

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My granddaughter was 2 years old when Mercy Children's Clinic opened in 1999.

We were still trying to figure out how to get her onto our Gannett health insurance.

I knew about Mercy because at Williamson A.M. we were covering its conception and launch. The clinic's primary mission was (and still is) to increase children's access to health care because even with the state's TennCare insurance, people were having a hard time finding providers. And those without insurance at all were having even bigger problems.

We weren't sure what to expect at Mercy, though — wondering whether it would have the dreary pall that some social services agencies have. But we decided to try it.

At that time, Dr. Tim Henschel, the founding physician, was the only doctor. Today there are seven doctors on staff, plus volunteer ones.

Henschel was very engaging, and gave us the feeling that our little girl was the only patient in the world. Frankly, that was our experience from receptionist to nurse, and our observation of staff interaction with other patients and family members. Not only did the place not have that sluggish, sad "welfare" cast, but the whole atmosphere was so supportive and professional that the experience exceeded what we've seen even in top-flight, for-profit health care.

A year later we were blessed with a grandson. By that time we had figured out how to get both of them on our insurance, and though Mercy exists as a resource for the uninsured and those on TennCare, we wanted to continue using it.

Last week I was honored to attend the clinic's eighth birthday celebration, where Dr. Tim announced that he would be moving on to another phase in his career in a few months. He also said that the board had resolved to expand Mercy Children's Clinic into other communities: The Franklin office already sees children from 24 counties.

It is a wonderful thing to create something that outlasts you. Some people try to do that with paintings, or sculpture, or pyramids. Dr. Tim has done that with the clinic. What he has fostered is something that is very important and will have a tremendous ripple effect.

Health care in our country has its problems, but the Mercy Children's Clinic success story is not among them. Its model, however, is among the solutions.

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