

February 12, 2003
The Villager

Clinton St. 'country doctor' puts patients' needs first

By Carlin Flora

The space inside the tenement building where Dr. David Ores, 43, practices family medicine on the lower East Side is more dorm room than doctor's office. A flimsy batik print flaps over his window. Red paper lanterns cast a moody light in the tiny hallway. The bookcase holds film theory and Russian literature. The bathroom is bare and grimy; paper towels hang from a paint roller jerry-rigged to a coat hanger. By the beat-up desk there are black folding chairs, a mismatched rug and a bouquet of pens in a tomato puree can.

"I'm a neighborhood country doctor in an urban setting," he says. At Ores' office, there is no nurse, no secretary, and no turning away a patient, ever. "I see the patient first, and then we talk money."

Evelyn McCue, 42, squeezes her big frame and big cheer into Ores's office. She just popped in to get a tetanus shot. "Saw you were open," she says. Ores swipes her arm with a cotton swab, and starts his favorite act of the examination show- getting smokers to quit.

He leans in and speaks rapidly, "You are on a train going down a hill, and it's about to hit a bridge. That's how it is with your smoking. Don't you want to get off the train?"

"It's my last surviving vice!" Evelyn says.

"Just wear the patch between cigarettes. I don't want to drag my ass to the hospital three times a week when you have emphysema. It's a selfish thing," he says.

"You gotta love Dr. Dave," Evelyn says, "He rocks."

Ores graduated from Columbia Medical School in 1985. His classmates are wealthy, they have "big houses and first wives" to support. His financial goal is to pay rent, and he barely achieves it each month. He lives in a small space behind the waiting room, with his German shepherd, Nikola.

Ores speaks mangles Spanglish with his many Dominican and Puerto Rican patients. The starvinf artists and hipsters who wander into his waiting room find a kindred spirit: one of Dr. Dave's tattoos is a red cross that matches the sign above his door. Others are of naked women with blue and green curves. He keeps his motorcycles parked out front.

On the Lower East Side, where he's lived for eight years,, more than 7,500 people receive public assistance. Citywide, approximately 1.7 million residents are uninsured, and there are many others who find themselves frustrated with the cold and often ineffective bureaucracies of H.M.O.s. Ores upholds the American neighborhood doctor tradition and had the respect and affection of the many neighbors he cares for.

It's Thursday afternoon, and Ores is wearing grubby sneakers and a baseball cap. "I don't have on my doctor costume yet," he says. Four mod purple and turquoise chairs and a tired- looking Babar rocker adorn the waiting area. N.P.R. blasts out of a radio, to drown out the voices of patient and doctor in the next room.

A wiry Dominican man in work boots named Eugenio comes in complaining about his vision. He can't see far away. Ores whips out a post-it note. He draws an eye on it and explains in Spanglish how eyes are like cameras.

"Yes, yes, I know camera," Eugenio says. "I want the laser surgery."

Ores says that it's not an option, because Eugenio is diabetic, which means his visions changes according to his blood sugar levels.

"How old are you, anyway?" Ores asks.

Eugenio says he's 55.

"Then you've already seen everything!"

Eugenio laughs and asks what he owes.

"Nothing," Ores says.

"I want them to understand why things are," Ores says, pointing to his post-it drawings. "It's science's fault, not mine. I try to explain it, not in an authoritative way."

The Lotus Club, a café by day and bar by night across the street from Ores's office, was around long before Clinton Street became the latest new thing on the Lower East Side. Its bamboo shades are drawn to keep the dark inside. The bartenders are androgynous and underfed. Everybody there knows Ores.

"Dave serves himself his coffee here every morning," says Robert Manuse, 37 a co-owner. (Ores calls it a C.M.O.; they give him free coffee, and he treats them and gives them flu shots.)

"He's a real blessing to the neighborhood. There are many people who have no health insurance and through our word they've gone to him," Manuse says.

Enrique Cervera, 41, is a Lotus regular and is without health insurance. He's seen Dave as a patient twice, "I can be more open with him. He listens. He's a good doctor."

Cervera knows Dr. Dave best from coffee talks on Lotus stools. "He's opinionated a lot of times. It's difficult for him to accept other ideas."

One topic that boils Ores's blood is the healthcare system. "It is morally unconscionable to invest in a private insurance company," Ores says. "Cancer doesn't care if you have insurance."

If Ores is opinionated, and even pushy, it is because the many things that don't make sense frustrate him. He doesn't talk in sentimental terms about patients dying without their medicine or drug addicts dying for a fix. He just talks about what would make more sense, for patients and for society.

"The link between drug war and healthcare is the emergency room," he says. "We spend about \$100 million a month on emergency room care for people involved with drugs. These people don't even have full names, never mind insurance. Drugs should be legal, and the money spent on the 'drug war' should go to healthcare."

As for the drug addicts, "They shouldn't be in prison," he says. "They should be given morphine. People on morphine are great members of society, and they aren't seducing kids in the schoolyard to buy drugs."

Ores sums up his views: "Rationality might be an idealogy."

When Hil Cato, 33, hurt her back earlier this year, she says her H.M.O. plan (Aetna, which cost her \$400 a month) sent her on a fruitless medical odyssey, where a primary doctor gave her referral after referral, specialists failed to mail each other test results and X-rays and weeks where she should have been in bed nursing a herniated disc were spent running around in search of a proper diagnosis. Dr. Dave wasn't on plan, but she finally broke down and walked over from the Lotus Club, where she was working. "Dr. Dave is easier to catch on the fly- you can walk into the office to see him."

"He drew conclusions based on what I told him. He tested me for anemia and I was extremely anemic. No one else had tested me for that."

He prescribed her a lot of iron and gave her a B-12 shot. And he reached into his deep bag of medical metaphors to explain iron deficiency.

"He said that if you have car parts for 1,000 cars, but only 100 headlights, you can only have 100 cars, iron being the headlights of the body."

Cato paid him \$40, but says she pays more when she can. "Because then I'm helping out people who can't pay. It's an effort to put as much in the pot as you can."

Ores explains that being with a patient is like sitting around a campfire. "They are telling the story, and you can't cut them off. You have to get the whole story. In some H.M.O.s you get seven minutes, and you can't get to know the patient."

While Ores is known to make patients laugh, he knows establishing a good rapport requires much more than humor. "It's also part interrogation. You're not a friend. You have to find out about drugs, sexual habits, things they may be hiding. A heroin user will come in complaining of pain, he'll say he needs morphine, but he won't mention the heroin."

"The way you do it is to talk fast," Ores reveals. "It's a musical, a judo motion, get into the flow, and they can't resist it. 'What kind of work do you do? Where do you live? Do you do heroin?'"

Ores's father is also a doctor; he is retired from his post as director of the New York Veterans Administration Hospital. His mother is a pediatrician. His parents divorced when Dave was 10. He and his two sisters lived with their mother in Northern New Jersey.

Although he was bright, Ores barely graduated from high school. He was sent to a private school for post-graduate year, where he began to excel, especially in science courses. He went on to college at Ohio Wesleyan.

He completed an internship in general practice at Overlook Hospital in New Jersey, figuring he would work for a couple of years and then go back for a specialization. After a stint at a hospital, he left town for Los Angeles for four years, where he worked at an H.M.O. and embarked on a sitcom-writing career.

“I sold a sitcom to Columbia Tri-Star, they optioned it, but it didn’t happen,” he notes.

Ores never looked at it as a choice between writing and medicine. His family saw it differently.

“His sisters were upset, because it was difficult for me to support him through medical school,” his mother recalls. “I was a single mother.”

He now works daily developing a show set in a psychiatric hospital. He’ll soon hand over his scripts to friends in the television business.

If I took off, I’d still see patients,” he says. “I’d work for free!”

During a lull between patients, Dr. Dave checks his messages and thumbs the two inches of forms in front of him from the morning’s patients. “See all the paper I generate?”

He scoffs at the idea that he is different than other doctors because of the generous services he provides. “Doctors always help people. They do lots of nice things. You just don’t hear about it.”

At 4:00, Dr. Dave goes back into his living quarters to fetch Nikola for a walk. After a while, he enters the waiting room in a tie and white coat of a real doctor. His short hair is spiked with gel.

When asked about his future plans, he says, “I know a lot about physics and astronomy, and because of that, I find it amazing that the Earth exists at all. I’m just happy when the sun comes up each morning.”

Before 6:00 rolls around, he sees a tall, blond man with “man problems,” and a 22-year-old who stapled herself with an upholstery gun.

“See what happens here?” he says. “It’s not dramatic. I don’t do pituitary surgery or anything.”

Ores sees that the stapled girl’s friend has stopped to light a cigarette on the sidewalk outside the office. He chases after her, “How about patches in between cigarettes?”