

Charles Barber on his new book "PEACE & HEALTH"

Marianne O'Hare: Welcome to Conversations on Health Care. This week, veteran journalist Thalia Assuras interviews author Charles Barber on his new book "Peace & Health," about our co-host, Mark Maselli's half century quest to address health inequity.

Charles Barber: It's the story of a 20-year-old who bands together with kind of a motley crew of people in Middletown in the early 70s and the kind of improbable journey that is now a major national healthcare provider.

Marianne O'Hare: Now, here's your guest host Thalia Assuras with Charlie Barber.

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Thalia Assuras: Hello, everyone. A half century ago, a group of small town activists and students in Middletown, Connecticut, set out to change health care. This was daring, it was radical, and it was profoundly just. That is the description that you'll find in this new book, Peace & Health, the history of the Community Health Center, Incorporated. It's written by Charlie Barber. He is a writer in residence at Wesleyan University. He's a renowned author of nonfiction books, and you will have read his writing in places such as the Washington Post and The New York Times. Charlie, welcome to Conversations on Health Care.

Charles Barber: Thank you, Thalia.

Thalia Assuras: You know, hitting a 50th anniversary is a big milestone, and I had the opportunity to speak with Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter about that accomplishment on a previous program. But now a book, why a book and who's going to pick it up?

Charles Barber: One of the reviewers of the book said, "It reads like a novel, but it's all true." It's the story of a 20-year-old, who's a college dropout, who bands together with a group of kind of a motley crew of people in Middletown in the early 70s. They include a pharmacist, business person, a leader of the African-American spiritual community, another college student at Wesleyan, who becomes a U.S. Senator, a former jazz musician who has kind of fallen on hard times, and then later a nurse practitioner. They all rally around this cry of health care as a right and not a privilege, which is sort of a radical idea now and certainly back then. So, I wanted to tell the story of how they pulled it off and the kind of improbable journey that is now a major national healthcare provider.

Thalia Assuras: You talk about a lot of different people in there and wondering how it is that they actually got together, that's really hard to do, especially when you think about the tumultuous times we're in now. I'm wondering at the same time, if you think it could happen now.

Charles Barber: I teach at Wesleyan and Mark came to my class, and Mark explained the origin story of him as a 20-year-old and starting a clinic that

looked like it was out of Haight-Ashbury with beads hanging down, and it was a substance-use counseling center and a place for draft counseling against the Vietnam War. Then he found a new site and built it by hand with a kind of edgy carpenter and this was sort of the first two years and then they were shut down by the power base in Middletown. The students, my students said, you could never do this now. There'd be so many things that would get in your way and Mark said, "Absolutely not, you can do it now." I'm here to tell you that this story can be done now, but Mark would say it's the rallying around an idea and having a big tent to get members of the community that represent different interests to come together and that's how you do it and you can do that now or in 1972.

Thalia Assuras: But Mark is the one who is the magnet, really? What was it and what is it in his personality that brought all these people together?

Charles Barber: Part of it's just a work ethic, I mean, just a flat out work ethic. He was profoundly inspired by this idea that health care is a right, and not a privilege, and even as a 20-year-old, I think inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and then later he had personal connections with Desmond Tutu and with the Dalai Lama. He was just profoundly inspired to kind of to inspire change at a local level and it's remarkable because he doesn't come from a healthcare background and he had dropped out of college and I think it was a profound sense of social justice and he talks about his mother taking Mark and his brother to Mississippi in the early 60s and him being shocked as a young kid by the poverty. It was a seismic thing for him. I think it was maybe seven years old. 10 years later, he shocked to find the same level of poverty in the African-American community in Middletown. One of the principal drivers of this sort of team of people that created the Community Health Center is in fact representative of that community who is sort of the spiritual advisor to the organization until her death.

Thalia Assuras: Right, so you're moving us into talking about Reba Moses, one of the original board members, daughter of a sharecropper in the Carolinas. Tell us more about her and her influence.

Charles Barber: I think you asked sort of how did Mark do it, I think there's this sort of fearlessness and as a 20-year-old just sort of walked into her neighborhood, which was the kind of the other side of the tracks quite literally in Middletown, was a place where there was flooding in the spring, and she would literally have to move out until the water subsided. It was shocking to him. Then he became almost like a member of her family. She was a matriarch of her community and I think he saw her as a kind of a mother figure and a matriarch. Then she became one of the first board members and became sort of the conscience of the organization over many years, from her experience of hardship.

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Thalia Assuras: And actually, too, we were talking about students who were part of the team and I believe that young John Hickenlooper helped Mark found CHC. He's a current U.S. Senator. Tell us about that relationship.

Charles Barber: Well, they first met because Hick needed a roommate and Mark answered an ad and they show up together and they have the same bicycle. They become roommates, and Hickenlooper is around Wesleyan for about 10 years. While he's going to school over the protracted period at Wesleyan, Mark and Hick lived together over in many different places. Hickenlooper as the sort of the budding legislator becomes a strategic partner with Mark, and the particular fight that they fight is with the City of Middletown around the allocation of HUD money, which is held back for political reasons from the city to the early Community Health Center. This is sort of mid 70s to early 80s, and Hickenlooper and Mark study up on the HUD regs, Mark goes to Washington and wins the fight. This was essential funding at that time and so it's Hickenlooper, who is the great friend also supports the purchase of the first building, but he's also the strategic advisor.

Thalia Assuras: Right, and they were part of that whole student unrest as well on campus and around campus, and that kind of propelled them at the same time and those around them to make up this team. Would you say that?

Charles Barber: Absolutely. You know, it started in 1971, the prototype of the clinic of what became the Community Health Center, in the tumult around the Vietnam War, Wesleyan students went on strike against the Vietnam War, they also decided not to go to class for a month, and so campus essentially closed down, and Wesleyan students started hanging out downtown and so it was Hickenlooper and a couple other Wesleyan students that also banded together with Mark and all inspired again, by the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement to do something in our backyard that sort of reflects the National Civil Rights Movement.

Thalia Assuras: I'm not sure a lot of people really realize that about a U.S. Senator from Colorado and about Mark Maselli himself who really had this hippie look at this long ponytail, and a half the time he was had to live with different people because he didn't really have a whole lot of his own, did he?

Charles Barber: He wasn't ruthless, but he was homeless. He was crashing all over town. He didn't have a car, he would hitchhike to Hartford to the state capitol for meetings, beads and incense, and this is very much a part of its time.

Thalia Assuras: Mark, and the others attracted a team, for example, to include Jerry Weitzman, a local pharmacist who was also like Reba Moses, a

mentor to Mark. Tell us about that relationship, Jerry Weitzman.

Charles Barber: I mean, I think if you look at the two people that just made it happen, but the two most prominent in that group are Reba and then the other was Jerry Weitzman, who was a pharmacist. Jerry was a very successful business person on Main Street. Mark walked into his pharmacy one day and said, Look, I'm setting up this clinic, I have no money. Can you do something for me? Jerry kind of said, oh, yeah, sure. Then later that afternoon, Jerry pulled up with his station wagon and dropped off medical equipment for free. Jerry became the Chairman of the Board of Directors for, I don't know, the next 25 years, and both Reba and Jerry are 30-40 years older than Mark and Jerry, among other things becomes the business advisor and also sort of vouches for Mark because he's the liaison to the business community and the establishment and kind of saying, Yeah, his hairs down halfway down his back, but he's all right, and that in terms of credibility with local community was huge.

Thalia Assuras: I want to get to Jerry's tragic death because it had an influence in terms of the of the future as well, but let me ask about one more character first, and that's James Moody, who was a big band musician in the 1930s, lost all his teeth. But with CHC, he became a patient board member after help free dental care, free health care, and he healed physically and emotionally. He paid it forward, didn't he?

Charles Barber: He did and he's sort of one of the other members of this band, and one of Mark's insights early on was to provide dental services first, partially because the first thing they got donated was a dental chair. Mark was thinking sort of holistically around behavioral health care and dental care and medical care, which was pretty ahead of its time. James was one of the first patients. He had lost his teeth. He couldn't play his instruments anymore. Early CHC provided him with new teeth, which was transformational for him both physically and sort of inserted his self image. James became again, another early board member and the first board member who was specifically a patient, which lead very quickly to most of the board members, which is now the case as we speak, being patient's another idea sort of 20 years ahead of its time to have the leadership of the organization having patient representation and James was a pioneer in that regard.

Thalia Assuras: Why was it so important for CHC to have that element?

Charles Barber: I think this is an example of Mark not having the credentials and the formal education, not knowing the rules, and he just thinking, well, patients know the quality of the services and what's being given to them and their issues, but obviously better than anybody else, why not. Mark didn't know that this was essentially taboo. Meanwhile, 30 years later, it's now best practice in progressive organizations around the country in healthcare that you have huge patient representation. I

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think it's an artifact of being an outsider and just having some common sense ideas and not knowing what you couldn't do.

Thalia Assuras: Common sense, how about that? You brought up Jerry Weitzman died tragically in a car accident and you quoted Mark as saying, in a very pointed chapter, the best way to honor Jerry's memories to go out and do things with great love, and that's actually happened through the Weitzman Institute named after Jerry, obviously. Tell us more about that the institute and how it has taken CHC forward nationally and internationally.

Charles Barber: Jerry died just a random insane tragedy of someone running into his car with a wife and two friends and they were all killed, going to a baseball game on a Friday night. This is late 90s. And Margaret Flinter, who became the fifth member of the team, highly qualified, advanced practice nurse, and she kind of shored up CHC's clinical game starting in the 80s when she joined. Margaret said about Jerry, he never rejected a good idea, and so he was a healthcare professional who followed the research, and so when Jerry died, Mark and Margaret over time created a research institute under his name, the Weitzman Institute, which is now a major part of the Community Health Center, and has really been the intellectual factory that has sprung the organization forward nationally and is leading educational efforts and telehealth that's impacting more than a million lives now. Again, one of Mark's fundamental insights, kind of not knowing the rules, so to speak, is an highly early embrace of technology, going back to the 70s, and collecting data, and hiring data specialists, like in 1975, to look at patient needs. When Jerry dies, you know, now 30 years later with CHC now having significant resources, Mark and Margaret found a research institute that looks at the research and by the way, the first Federally qualified health center, the first in the country to start a research institute and it's now led research pursuits that have transformed the care not only in Connecticut, but all over the country.

Thalia Assuras: And in fact, Federal funding had been a problem and many people had expected the Clinton Administration to boost funding for CHC. It didn't. That happened under the two President Bush's. How did it happen that way?

Charles Barber: So the first President Bush signed legislation in 1990. It led to an incredible transformation in health care, and what it did is it tripled the reimbursement rate for services that the Community Health Center and other organizations were providing. It also made drugs for patients much more attainable. It was absolutely transformational to this Community Health Center starting in 1990. It was a sea change. It made them go from as worthy as what they were doing was kind of just getting by to a viable business model, and so between 1990 and 2000, they opened 10 major new bricks and mortar clinics in cities all

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over Connecticut, thereby setting them up to create a National Research Institute in the 2000s.

Thalia Assuras: So let's bring us to the COVID crisis in which CHC has been prominent, and there are these terrific stories in the book and photographs about the great efforts of CHC in vaccines and in testing. You say in the book that CHC was made for this moment. What do you mean by that?

Charles Barber: Well, the moment was January 21, so the vaccines had just come out literally a month before testing hundreds of thousands of people with bodysuits and people driving up, you know, those really nightmarish days and that had gotten the state's attention. I think the key to it was the entrepreneurial spirit that goes back to the early days of Jerry Weitzman of having, you know, people that run businesses at the helm of the Community Health Center. So out of that, Mark received a call like January 8, 2021, from the State. Mark, can you set up a mass vaccine site on an abandoned airstrip in East Hartford, where we're going to do maybe 2,000 to 3,000 vaccines a day, we're going to have people drive in? Nobody had done this in the country at this point. Mark says, Yes, I'll do it. When do you want it? We want it in a week, then and this is a senior official from the Department of Public Health. Do you want to contract? Mark said no, we'll do it without a contract, and Mark's reasoning and he dealt with the State for 40 years. One, he ultimately trusted the State that they would make it good. Second, he knew that if you know a contractor and lawyers got involved, it would take six months, and the more established players like Yale New Haven and Hartford Hospital would do it, they wouldn't do it as quick as CHC, but they would do it.

Literally, I think 10 days later, they have this setup, a military operation, literally with the National Guard there with 500 cones and almost like an old toll station off of the highway people driving up and this became the second mass vaccine site in the country. I think CHC has vaccinated almost a million people against COVID at this point. People came from half the eastern United States to this site, and it brought the Community Health Center to a national level of prominence. This was on the CNN and the Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal, and this was almost in their 50th year anniversary. It sort of brought home, all of the ambitions of this 20-year-old kid, camping out to try and find a site for his clinic that had just been shut down, down the street, totally different, but totally the same. It's an impossible thing to do. I'm going to do it.

Thalia Assuras: Such faith and confidence that this could be done that he and his team could absolutely do this, and I think the final tally was you said about a million, nearly 800,000 Connecticut residents got the vaccine through CHC and they actually got some recognition from the White House with some Easter Eggs. Tell us that story.

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- Charles Barber: They're kind of funny story. So, Mark gets a call from the folks at the main office saying there's a big package, it's to you and it's from the White House. What is it? Mark comes over and it's hundreds and hundreds of wooden Easter Eggs that were given to 20 organizations nationally in recognition of their COVID efforts. It was Easter and so the Easter Bunny in costume at various mass vaccine sites literally gave them out to patients. As a matter of fact, I got my vaccine that day, and I got one of the Easter Eggs.
- Thalia Assuras: What do you think is really going to inspire the reader in picking up this book?
- Charles Barber: That idea has changed the world like Margaret Mead, and small groups of people change the world. The Martin Luther King quote that the arc of justice tilts towards justice. It's a slow tilt. I think in these hard times, and I'm thinking of my college students at Wesleyan, they're in the middle of COVID that's destroying their college years, and so I think a book like Peace & Health tells the story students and a younger generation because I think I kind of had a younger generation in mind writing the book, the tumult in which the Community Health Center was created Vietnam, civil rights, poverty, incredible violence in the United States. There hasn't been that much divisiveness until now and out of the crucible of that hatred and fear came the Community Health Center. I think the ultimate message is you can do it now, and as Mark said to my students, he had his backup. Mark got the Wesleyan buildings and grounds people to install the dental, the first dental chair to lift it up and do the platform. I know the students are thinking that would be over social media in 10 seconds, and everybody would get fired and Mark said to them, no, you just do something different. You just figure it out. So the message of out of great trouble can come something like this. It was the work. They were hippies but not really. They were organized.
- John Hickenlooper, his hair was started down, started scraggly looking, but the strategic mind of a future senator, the business mind of a very -- he was among the most successful business people in Middletown, the spiritual mind of a sort of renowned leader in the community of Reba Moses. They have the romantic idea of Peace & Health, but they're workers. I think the other way that this book can be helpful as a roadmap of how one organizes politically and strategically, and how one goes across the aisle, whether it's Democrats to Republicans or 20 year olds to 50 year olds, or blacks or Jewish folks, that you cross the aisle, and there's power in that true diversity of differing expertise.
- Thalia Assuras: Where does CHC go from here? You know it so well.
- Charles Barber: If you look at the history of the CHC, it's constantly morphing, which made writing it a challenge. Mark is famous or infamous for saying,

we change every two years and I literally saw that because I saw the COVID stuff that I was talking about. Now, I'm seeing the cusp of post COVID. I think it is and is not a healthcare organization at the end of the day. I think it's a social transformation organization. I think we're all dealing with pandemics of not just COVID but racism and environmental crises. I think the idea of further in reach into what are called the Social Determinants of Health, not just people's presenting problems to where they live, saying your zip code is more important than your genetic code. So many of those things are what impact people's lives and the length of their lives, and so I think, a further in reach to the fundamental issues of what is at stake and what drives health outcomes.

The current medical director, Veena Chanamsetty, who is another of many stars that Community Health Center has, she sees her work as much around the social determinants of health as health care. They see every encounter with a patient not only as an opportunity to look at their presenting problem, but to look at the environment in which they're living, their friends, their family as a way to transform health and health care.

Thalia Assuras: Charlie Barber, thanks for joining us, and the book Peace & Health is available on www.amazon.com. It's in hardcover e-book and an audio book version. Thank you to the audience for joining us today. You can learn more about Conversations on Health Care and sign up for the email updates at www.chcradio.com. Thank you.

Charles Barber: Thank you, Thalia.

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Mark Masselli: At Conversations on Health Care, we want our audience to be truly in the know when it comes to the facts about health care reform and policy. Lori Robertson is an award winning journalist and Managing Editor of FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters that aim to reduce the level of deception in U.S. politics. Lori, what have you got for us this week?

Lori Robertson: Since the 2010-2011 flu season, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that everyone six months and older get an annual flu shot with rare exceptions, including those with allergies to the vaccine ingredients. The CDC's recommendation is based on evidence that vaccination can prevent people from getting sick with flu and reduce the severity of disease if someone does fall ill. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDC estimates that on average vaccination has prevented more than five million illnesses, over 70,000 hospitalizations and 6,000 deaths each season. The effectiveness of the flu vaccine varies each year, depending on how well the strains selected for inclusion in the vaccine match those that

ultimately circulate. Flu vaccines also tend to not work as well in older people who are more vulnerable to severe influenza still the shot prevent millions of illnesses and thousands of deaths each season.

In some parts of the country, particularly in the south, flu activity is already high. So far, it appears that this year's vaccine is a good match for the circulating influenza strains. This year for the first time, the CDC is recommending that people 65 years of age and older get a high dose flu vaccine, since there is evidence that those shots may work better than standard flu shots in that group. That's my FactCheck for this week. I'm Lori Robertson, Managing Editor of FactCheck.org.

Margaret Flinter: FactCheck.org is committed to factual accuracy from the country's major political players and is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have a fact that you'd like check, email us at www.chc.radio.com. We'll have FactCheck.org's Lori Robertson check it out for you here on Conversations on Health Care.

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Margaret Flinter: Each week Conversations highlights a bright idea about how to make wellness a part of our communities and everyday lives. Vaccinations are considered one of the great public health achievements of the 20th century, reducing fatalities from most common and fatal diseases by up to 99%, but some of those numbers just aren't stacking up. As recently as 2009, only 45% of the nation's preschool-aged children had received all of their recommended vaccinations and boosters. Researchers at the Children's Outcome Research Program at Children's Hospital in Colorado decided to take an in-depth look at the problem.

Dr. Allison Kempe: Primary care practitioners are so overstretched. There are so many competing demands that it's rather impractical, and they also require a level of technical expertise that sometimes they don't have.

Margaret Flinter: Dr. Allison Kempe heads up the children's Outcome Research Program, and she conducted a study on what would help to generate better compliance with required vaccinations. She found that when parents received timely reminders from their state and local health departments, parents were much more likely to get the vaccinations and boosters for their children that they needed.

Dr. Allison Kempe: It didn't take away from the primary care providers, but it helped them to do the reminder recall for their practices centrally so this was much more efficient and much more cost efficient. In a fairly short six-month period where it this was done centrally, about 19% of children who were not up-to-date became up-to-date versus about 13% in the practice based recall state, which on a population level is really very

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powerful.

Margaret Flinter: And the study also suggests that there's a cost savings and reduce medical costs as fewer children fall ill.

Dr. Allison Kempe: The costs of not preventing these illnesses are very high.

Margaret Flinter: A State Health Department driven vaccination program that assists private practices in vaccine compliance for their patient population, improving vaccination rates of young and vulnerable children while improving the public health. Now that's a bright idea.

[Music]

Mark Masselli: I'm Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I'm Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Peace and health.

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Marianne O'Hare: Conversations on Health Care is recorded in the Knowledge and Technology Center Studios in Middletown, Connecticut, and is brought to you by the Community Health Center, now celebrating 50 years of providing quality care to the underserved, where healthcare is a right, not a privilege, www.chc1.com and www.chcradio.com.

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