

COMMUNITY MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



MOUNTAIN AREA HEALTH EDUCATION CENTER (MAHEC)

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Answers provided by Jennifer Maurer, MAHEC external communications director
What is MAHEC?

Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC) was established in 1974 as part of the North Carolina Area Health Education Center system to meet the critical need for healthcare workforce recruitment, training, and retention in Western North Carolina. Our largely rural region has shortages of primary care, mental health, and dental professionals in all 16 counties. Many counties lack practicing surgeons, psychiatrists, ob/gyn physicians, and labor and delivery services. We are dedicated to excellence in clinical care, health professions education, and innovative practices that can be replicated nationally.

Located in Asheville, MAHEC serves North Carolina's 16 westernmost counties. We are the largest of the nine-state Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) that address national and state concerns with the supply, retention, and quality of health professionals, especially in rural and underserved areas of

the state. MAHEC is also home to UNC Health Sciences at MAHEC, a vibrant academic health center that includes programs affiliated with the UNC School of Medicine, the UNC Adams School of Dentistry, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy, and an interprofessional medical research department.

MAHEC provides quality, compassionate family medicine, internal medicine, ob/gyn, dental, and psychiatric care through more than 179,000 annual patient visits that include WNC's newest residents, the more than 2,000 babies delivered by our ob/gyn, maternal-fetal medicine, and family medicine physicians and nurse-midwives. In addition, our sports medicine, addiction medicine, behavioral health, pharmacotherapy, and nutrition services lend support to an advanced care team model, where providers work together to support the whole person.

MAHEC's Center for Health Professions Education provides opportunities that inspire and prepare students to pursue healthcare

careers in Western North Carolina. Programs span high school through undergraduate, postgraduate, and medical school to create a pipeline of well-trained healthcare professionals for our underserved region.

MAHEC is also committed to regional population health. Our practice support services ensure WNC medical practices, especially those in rural areas, have the support they need to deliver high-quality care within a rapidly changing healthcare system. MAHEC is an advocate and training partner for community health workers in Western North Carolina and across the state. This frontline healthcare workforce is a critical bridge between the community and healthcare systems and organizations working to improve health especially for those living in rural areas, and communities of color.

The Department of Research and Library Science at UNC Health Sciences at MAHEC

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is WNC's leading source of rural health information and is focused on healthcare workforce development, academic medicine, clinical research, and practice transformation to improve patient, community, and population health.

Who are the people you help and serve?

We provide family medicine, internal medicine, ob/gyn, psychiatric, and dental services in Asheville; rural dental services in Columbus; and rural ob/gyn services in Franklin and Brevard. MAHEC is the only safety net ob/gyn provider and maternal-fetal medicine provider in Western North Carolina. We are also the only certified community behavioral health clinic in WNC, supporting individuals with serious mental illness and addictive disorders, regardless of insurance status. Our community and public health initiatives target areas of greatest need including rural, low-wealth, and BIPOC communities. Our educational and workforce development initiatives train the next generation of healthcare professionals for Western North Carolina with health career programs beginning at the high school level through graduate medical education, and continuing professional development for established healthcare providers.

We also work with community health workers and certified peer support specialists to ensure our patients and community members have access to support for all the things that impact health outside of our clinic walls – including medication access, stable housing, food, transportation, and ongoing support for mental health and substance use recovery.

What impact do you think MAHEC is making?

Western North Carolina has a shortage of healthcare professionals, and higher rates of chronic disease, substance use, mental health challenges, poverty, and other life-limiting conditions. By actively recruiting, training, and retaining healthcare professionals here in WNC, we are working to address these healthcare workforce gaps and make high quality healthcare accessible to those who need it most.

We train 185 physicians, pharmacists, and dentists each year in our 17 residency and fellowship programs. As of June 2021, 651 physicians and dentists have graduated from MAHEC. More than 60% of our family medicine graduates stay and practice in WNC. Each newly graduated family physician adds approximately \$3.1 million to the local economy and creates 17 new jobs.

MAHEC also provides continuing professional development programming to

support health professionals with their ongoing educational and credentialing needs. Last year, MAHEC provided more than 1,000 educational programs to more than 22,500 participants in a variety of health professions from across WNC and the nation.

Our school nurses and school-based therapists are ensuring children have the support they need to stay healthy and in school for optimal learning. And our ob/gyn and psychiatry practices ensure WNC residents have access to ob/gyn and mental health services regardless of insurance status.

What challenges does MAHEC face?

We are deeply concerned about persistent health inequities created by structural racism and other factors like rurality, poverty, and healthcare workforce shortages. These issues are what some have called "wicked problems" that are difficult to solve and require creative, collaborative, and concerted effort to address. We partner with community leaders, community health workers, and community-based organizations to address these problems.

Our community-based doula program, SistasCaring4Sistas, is part of a broader social justice movement called Mothering Asheville, which pairs families of color with doulas to improve outcomes for birthing people and their babies, including families who struggle, or have struggled, with substance use. Black infants are three times more likely to die in their first year of life than white, non-Hispanic infants; and Black birthing people are twice as likely to die due to birth complications.

What impact has COVID-19 had on MAHEC, and how has the organization adapted?

COVID-19 has impacted our region in profound ways, posing its own health challenges as a highly transmissible and potentially serious disease, and making other health conditions worse due to the strain on healthcare systems and the isolation the pandemic brought with it. COVID-19 also inspired collaboration on an unprecedented scale, and showed how resilient Western North Carolina communities can be when we work together.

Early in the pandemic, MAHEC conducted an assessment of primary care practices across WNC to identify the need for personal protective equipment and testing supplies, and to provide support for COVID-19 prevention and treatment, and telehealth implementation. We worked with state and local partners to ensure healthcare practices and long-term care facilities could safely remain open.

When COVID-19 vaccines became available, MAHEC worked with regional partners and community health workers to ensure every WNC resident had access to vaccines, especially those who are most impacted by COVID-19. MAHEC partnered with UNC Asheville to run a large-scale community vaccine clinic that administered more than 20,000 doses, and partnered with the state and FEMA to run a mobile vaccine clinic that supported all 16 WNC counties, and delivered nearly 10,000 adult and pediatric vaccines and booster shots.

We were the first primary care provider in the region to offer life-saving monoclonal antibody infusion treatments and post-acute covid care for individuals struggling with long-term side effects from COVID infection. MAHEC also partnered with six WNC colleges and universities to develop protocols and a student health ambassador program to ensure students could continue to safely learn and live on campus throughout the pandemic while minimizing COVID-19 risks. **TE**



Members of MAHEC's team: Left to right: (Back row): Amadeo Valdez, DDS, MAS and Bill Gist, MD; (front row): Jacquelyn Hallum, MBA, MHA and Felicia Hipp, MSN, RN, CNE

JACQUELYN HALLUM, MBA, MHA**MAHEC Health Careers & Diversity Education Director**

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**Describe your work.**

I am so proud of my organization and the work that we do in our community, WNC and across the state. The work that we do changes lives, saves lives, and makes lives better in so many ways. Because of the health, wealth, and educational disparities, we work to create resources that move the needle in these areas. Working at MAHEC has even changed my life for the better. I am healthier and wiser, and it has given me a platform to do what I love most: working and creating programming for high school, college, and professional students, as well as being a part of the leadership team that is charged with oversight of the organizational equity planning and implementation. Creating and strengthening pathways/pipelines for students and medical learners of color and rural communities is an essential goal in improving the health and wealth in western NC.

What inspired your community work?

My work was inspired by the strong and ambitious women in my family and my community. I come from a legacy of strong and determined women that laid the groundwork for service, faith, and growth. Community was our lifeline from where we gained our strength, and where we stood and took our places to continue the work. I grew up, and was educated, in segregated communities and segregated schools with teachers, principles, doctors, dentists, nurses, business owners that all looked like me. We all worked collectively to move our communities forward while others tried to push us back, even today in the 21st century. "If not us, then who, if not now, then when?" - John Lewis

How long have you been active in the community, or doing the type of community work you described above?

I came back to Asheville in 1979 after graduation from an HBCU - NC A&T State University. I did not plan to stay in Asheville; my goal was to only stay a few years, work, and save up for law school. The leaders in my community reached out and pulled me forward, and showed me the importance of serving others and our community. To whom much is given, much is expected, and there, it began for me. Serving my community and supporting friends and family is all that I know and all that I love. My community is everything; it held me up when I could have fallen; it pushed me forward when I could have just stood still, and it stood by me during the darkest of times. My community is my life, and my life is my community; and now I am an Elder tasked with growing our future leaders as I was, and the ones before me....

How is your work making a difference in your local community, city, or state?

I came home fired up and ready to make a difference... somewhere else, NOT Asheville. Fate, faith, friends, and family (4F) had other plans, and here I am, 43 years later, still in Asheville. I love my community because it made me who I am and held me up when I could have fallen.

To whom much is given, much is required. Through these years I have been a business owner, student, community worker/activist, community leader, mentor, mentee, board member, stakeholder, teacher, bridge builder in Asheville, Western North Carolina (WNC), across North Carolina, and beyond. Community activism has no borders, but does have barriers. I created a path for others to follow as others did for me. Community service is legacy work. It is not for gain

or the glory. It can be hard and thankless work but the task remains to just move forward; and I do hope my work has made a difference.

What challenges have you faced, and continue to face, as a minority or woman, or community organization?

Being a woman and a woman of color in WNC has definitely been a challenge which is why my initial plan of staying in WNC was a no! My first year home was the first time someone called me the N word where I worked and then again and again. I received less pay than my white counterparts and the opportunities for growth were slim. I was hurt and sad many times but through my faith I gained strength. I realized that because of my ancestors I was further along in the process than they were and that I would just try to keep moving the needle. And those after me would rise higher and go further. In other words, I would try to create paths for others to follow and surpass and be greater than.

What areas of business do you struggle with the most?

I struggle with the environment, inequity, inequality and fairness in the business world. I struggle with having a seat at the table and not being heard. The struggles are real here and everywhere for people of color, and particularly women, and women of color. The glass ceilings are being shattered every day. And sometimes the glass ceilings are being replaced with concrete, and then we just have to pull out the drill.

My organization is growing in leaps and bounds and recognizes that it is time for a change. I may not benefit from it, but those after me will; and those who choose not to grow with the organization will move on, creating a place for others that will meet the goals and mission of this wonderful organization.

How has COVID-19 affected your work, and how have you adapted?

By March of 2020, in WNC and across the country and the world, we moved into various phases of disaster and shut down. We were snatched into a world of ambiguity, school closings,

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business closures, home foreclosures, unemployment, and death and dying. COVID has, and continues, to affect my professional, business, and personal life. There is not yet business as usual. Even though restrictions have eased, we are still in pandemic mode. A mask and sanitizer are still part of my toolkit. I carry it like I used to carry lipstick and makeup. It was easier for me to adapt than most because I live alone. I didn't have the added work of different people coming in and out of my home. I was relatively isolated and was able to continue my work remotely. Because of technology, our work was able to transcend the boundaries of WNC and the state, and moved to national and international resources. Some of these strides will remain. Those are the positives. Some of the negatives are work had no boundaries. Our meetings were back-to-back, and I barely had time for lunch. No breaks, and extreme meetings. My mental and physical health suffered. But somehow I adapted; better on some days, and some days not. There was no playbook for an epidemic, and we had to write our guidelines and rules as we went along. These last two years have been quite a ride, and I have survived, and MAHEC has survived. MAHEC was a tremendous leader during the epidemic, and I was so proud of the work, time, and resources that were poured into WNC. There were many unsung heroes. I have adapted, but still suffer from the effects of COVID PTSD. I believe we will for years to come.

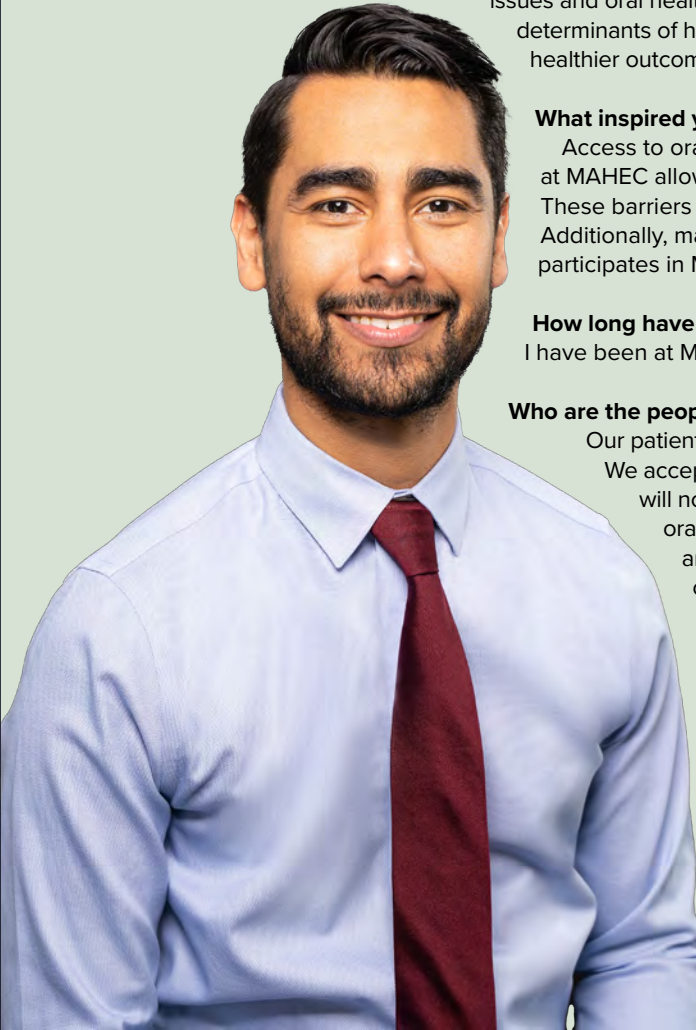
Please share any wisdom, lessons learned, or advice that could help someone following in your footsteps.

Some words to live by are forgiveness, perseverance, self-worth, resilience and self-love. Learn to be yourself because everyone else is already taken. It is so critical to love yourself and to be your own best friend. Do not be a self-critic but be a self-ally. Practice the five Ps: *Proper preparation prevents poor performance*. It is better to be prepared for an opportunity, and it not come, than to have an opportunity, and not be prepared! And lastly, stay away from draining, not-going-anywhere people when possible. Find people to connect with who have similar goals and dreams. And most importantly, try to love everyone; but be careful who has a seat on the front row of your life. Some may need to be on the back seat. **TE**

AMADEO VALDEZ, DDS, MAS**MAHEC Dentistry General Practice Residency Director**

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I am a general dentist and oral medicine specialist. Besides providing comprehensive dental care, I am the dental residency program director at MAHEC. We offer training to seven dentists each year, which exposes them to dental health issues and oral health needs of Western North Carolina. Residents experience how the social determinants of health impact dental health, and can focus on treatment plans which create healthier outcomes.

**What inspired your community work?**

Access to oral health care is a big problem in our community and state. Working at MAHEC allows me to impact various access-to-care barriers for our community. These barriers include high-cost care and lack of access to oral medicine providers. Additionally, many providers do not accept Medicaid patients, so being a provider that participates in Medicaid keeps me going.

How long have you been with MAHEC?

I have been at MAHEC for three years, six months, and 24 days, but who is counting?

Who are the people you help?

Our patient pool is reflective of the patient demographics of Western North Carolina. We accept Medicaid, self-pay, and commercially insured patients. Additionally, we will now be offering a sliding fee scale for patients who need assistance. In my oral medicine practice, I specialize in patients who have oral lesions, muscular and neuropathic facial pain, oral health complications from cancer treatment, or systemic diseases such as diabetes and Sjogren's syndrome.

How is your work making a difference in your local community?

Our dental residency program's success is two-fold. First, the patients who desperately need oral health care can receive care affordably. Second, we provide the perfect environment for our learner dentists to build their clinical skills in a community health setting while increasing our community's access to care.

What challenges have you faced, and continue to face, as a minority?

As a Hispanic male dentist, I have become acutely aware of how underrepresented Hispanics are in the dental workplace. Although it can sometimes be frustrating not to see folks in my industry that

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Amadeo Valdez, from page 43

“look like me,” I try and channel any struggles as a minority provider towards a personal and competitive advantage. I’ve found that I am a lot more resilient, and I know that I can get through challenging situations, as I haven’t always had it easy.

What areas of business do you struggle with the most?

Billing and insurance! I need a whole new degree to understand all the intricacies of dental insurance, and I am just glad that we have a great team that supports me every day.

How has COVID-19 affected your work, and how have you adapted?

Since the start of the pandemic, I have been busier, but I am definitely missing in-person meetings and the chance to welcome my patients with a smile without a mask on.

What advice do you have for others following in your footsteps?

Walk the walk and talk the talk. By doing so, you ensure that people trust you and your actions. This is a sign of strong leadership and character. **TE**

FELICIA HIPPI, MSN, RN, CNE

MAHEC Chief of Clinical Operations

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I have an extremely rewarding role at MAHEC. I serve as the chief of clinical operations. This means that I have the opportunity to partner and work with all of the clinical departments and the departments that support them, such as information technology and quality improvement.

What inspired your community work?

It’s simple. I feel like I was called to do the work that I do. I cannot think of anything that I would rather be than a nurse and business woman. I genuinely care about people and want them to be as healthy as possible. Physical, mental, and emotional health resources are key to good health. Every human being will need to experience healthcare at some point. It really excites me to be part of MAHEC’s team, as we not only serve patients, but also make a strong contribution to the education of the future healthcare professionals of WNC and beyond.

How long have you been with MAHEC?

I have lived in WNC my entire life; I’ve been a nurse for 27 years, and have been employed at MAHEC for seven years. Being a healthcare leader is very exciting for me as it allows me to work with teams that have a direct impact on patient care. Leading these teams means that I am able to collaborate, facilitate, and help in the execution of new services, as well as improve the provision of current services.

How is your work making a difference locally and/or statewide?

We have had so many opportunities, especially during the pandemic, to partner with local, city, and state agencies and organizations, from providing support to rural practices for PPE at the beginning of the pandemic, to vaccine events at UNC Asheville, to being a safety net provider for OB care. It is a privilege to be called to serve in this way.

What challenges have you faced, and continue to face, especially as a minority or woman?

I work to intentionally turn challenges into opportunities. I think that my lived experience as an African American woman has developed the skill of making adjustments a super power for me. I am confident and authentic, but always willing to think critically and differently about things. As a person who is often the last to be

heard in a room, I have become adept at framing things and saying things in different ways that might inspire people to hear me. It is not easy, but it is required to help create opportunities for more people who look like me. I bring color, literally and figuratively. I am required to live in a space of resilience, and as a result, self-care is a priority; and I have to live in tune with my soul. That feels good. I do not take my place in this world for granted. I am grateful for it.

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**BILL GIST, MD**

Director, MAHEC OB/GYN Program Director

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I am the OB/GYN residency program director, and I ensure an educational experience that will enable resident physicians to obtain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to independently practice obstetrics and gynecology, and prepare for board certification. This is done over four years. I also provide care for patients in the office and hospital settings. I am involved in diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives at MAHEC, and responsible for DEI training for the residency programs at MAHEC, including implicit bias simulation. I am a board member of the Western North Carolina Medical Society, and head the Black Physicians Affinity Group (BPAG). I also work on recruiting and retention of Black physicians.

How long have you been with MAHEC?

Three years

What inspired your community work?

Recognizing the racial disparities in the community and the lack of underrepresented minorities (URM) in Western North Carolina. MAHEC has a strong history of advocacy that is infectious also. The main concern is the lack of URM providers. Data has shown that patients do better with providers that look like them (even newborns).

How is your work making a difference in your local community?

Educating physicians in training is key. We are supporting that work in simulation with our residents at MAHEC. Providers have to recognize their bias to be able to affect changes in their behavior. BPAG is supporting the Black physicians of the region that rarely see each other.

What challenges have you faced, and continue to face?

Time and funding are the main issues.

How has COVID-19 affected your work, and how have you adapted?

It has highlighted the disparities. We have had to cut back on in-person events, and have had some virtual, but it is not the same.

Is there anything else you’d like to add that might help others following in your footsteps?

Camaraderie and bonding are essential. Being able to meet and discuss problems, and supporting each other, helps relieve the stress of being underrepresented in the community. **TE**

**Felicia Hipp**, from page 44**What do you struggle with the most?**

Nothing specific, but the themes that can be stressful include:

- Understanding that I fit because I don’t fit.
- The expectation that I need to be at the top of my game every moment of every day, otherwise it won’t be good enough.
- The knowledge that I can’t speak for every Black woman, but being in the position where I am the only Black woman who is able to speak, so I better say it!

How has COVID-19 affected your work, and how have you adapted?

Since I work in healthcare, there’s a lot to unpack here. Initially, the work of keeping patients and staff safe while providing care. This required a great deal of planning, communicating, reassuring, and continuous information gathering and learning. Second was supporting the development and implementation of COVID-19 services like our employee health and infection prevention internal systems, our Acute Care Clinic, COVID-19 vaccine initiatives, and monoclonal antibody infusions. Many of the systems that we put in place are still in play. The adapting is continuous, but the intention always lives with the mission to provide excellent patient care and to recruit, train and retain present and future healthcare professionals of WNC.

What advice do you have for others following in your footsteps?

Believe in yourself. I know that this is often said, but it is so true. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF! There is someone out there waiting for you to accomplish the thing that you have set out to do. It is not just for you. Know that every decision that you make today drives your future tomorrows. Bet on yourself. I have always done that. I am relentless about working hard, learning and growing intentionally, and being extraordinarily kind while remaining honest and direct. Operating in love is the foundation of my existence. **TE**