



STORY BY **DEBORAH LEE LUSKIN**
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY **GRACE COTTAGE FAMILY HEALTH & HOSPITAL**

Healthcare in the **Heart** of the Valley

Visitors to Stratton may not know about Grace Cottage Family Health and Hospital, but they should: Vermont's smallest hospital sits in the heart of Windham County, less than thirty minutes away. The hospital was established in Townshend by Carlos Otis, M.D., the forward-looking physician and founding Medical Director of the Stratton clinic that bears his name.

Dr. Otis arrived in the West River Valley in 1939 and spent the next decade driving bad roads to deliver babies, set bones, and administer medical care on hill farms—some without indoor plumbing. He founded Grace Cottage Hospital in 1949. Thirty-nine babies were born between opening day in August and the end of that year, and seventy babies the next. Babies were booming.

That was 77 years ago, and both medicine and demographics have changed. So has Grace Cottage, which helps explain how a 19-bed hospital is thriving in 2026, when cottage hospitals across the country have become a rarity and even mid-sized hospitals are struggling. Ironically, its small size is one reason Grace Cottage has been able to pivot as medicine, technology, demographics, and medical financing have changed. Remarkable community support is another.

In the first ten years of the hospital's existence, a combination of both residents and second homeowners donated their houses and financed the renovations of the buildings that formed the original hospital campus. Mary Plumb, Hattie Stratton, and

Ruth Heins' bequeathed the buildings that became the hospital, nursing home, and assisted living residence, respectively. Murray McConnell, a New York City investment banker, purchased a property for a parking lot and a village house for a business office. Abel Grout financed the hospital renovations with the caveat that the hospital be named after his wife, Grace.

This extraordinary generosity has been amplified by donations of sweat equity in the Vermont "can do" tradition. In the earliest days, farmwives donated home canned vegetables to the hospital pantry. When the Valley needed an ambulance service, volunteer drivers and EMTs went out in a retired hearse until Rescue, Inc. expanded professional emergency services to serve towns in the West River Valley. When the drug store in Townshend closed its doors, a local family helped establish the Messenger Valley Pharmacy on campus.

In return, the hospital was here when the COVID-19 pandemic descended. Grace Cottage responded nimbly, becoming a beacon of help and hope with a dedicat-

ed respiratory clinic, drive-through testing, and easy-access vaccines. Volunteers and donors continue to support Grace Cottage as this small institution continuously adapts to changes in medical practice and keeps excellent, accessible health care close to home.

As medicine has changed, so has the hospital. It has expanded to meet a critical need for skilled, rehabilitative services following acute medical and surgical interventions from specialists at large medical centers. Patients return to the Valley to achieve the highest level of recovery while receiving Grace Cottage's hallmark warm, personalized care. Patients from away now request to recover and rehabilitate at Grace Cottage. As one patient who has received medical care in eight states explains, "For the past 20 years, I have received services from Grace Cottage's clinic, ER, PT, lab, radiology, and pharmacy. I recommend that other hospitals study Grace Cottage, learn how they do what they do, and make that the standard for which all health care facilities should aspire. Grace Cottage is that good, and functions that well."



Opposite Page: Pediatric Provider Mandy Lindsey with a young Grace Cottage patient. **This Page:** Carlos G. Otis, M.D., the visionary founder of both the Carlos Otis Clinic in Stratton and Grace Cottage Hospital.

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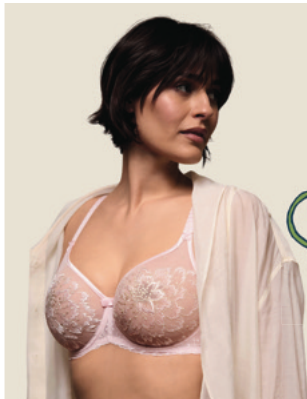
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Grace Cottage has also been providing comfort care long before palliative care became a medical specialty. Now, Grace Cottage has a dedicated two-room Hospice Suite, where the dying are kept comfortable, and the grieving are comforted. One family whose beloved aunt spent her last days in hospice at Grace Cottage expressed gratitude for how their relative was able to live her last days with "grace and dignity, with minimal medical interference." Another family expressed thanks for "the wonderful, tender, loving care Jim received, and for your support of all of us." In this, Grace Cottage has stayed true to its roots of caring for its community from cradle to grave, and the community has returned the favor with unprecedented support.

For all the advances in preventative medicine and health maintenance, the Emergency Department—no longer just a room, but an entire new wing—is busier than ever, with over 4,000 visits a year. They treat everyone and everything, from loggers to leaf-peepers, and from poison ivy to catastrophic injury. As a Critical Access Hospital, the Grace Cottage ED provides critical care when minutes matter.

The Emergency Department staff at Grace Cottage has always embraced advances in medicine as they emerge and has been recognized by the American Heart Association for excellence in treatment of stroke and high proficiency in treating patients experiencing ST-elevation myocardial infarction, the deadliest type of heart attack. The emergency team is prepared to rapidly diagnose and stabilize the most serious conditions and injuries that come through its doors, access Dartmouth Telehealth for advanced medical advice in real time, and order a helicopter flight to a Level 1 trauma center.

While Grace Cottage Family Health and Hospital started with 19 beds and an Emergency Room, it now houses a full-service laboratory; Diagnostic Imaging; Physical, Occupational, and Speech Therapy; and a retail pharmacy. Not to be overlooked is the Dietary Department, which cooks up a multi-course mid-day meal for all comers. With advance notice,

lunch can include a hospital tour. Thanks to generous donors, in just the past five years all these departments have been renovated, updated, and/or expanded—all except for the busiest, and the one department that visitors probably know the least about: Grace Cottage Family Health (GCFH).

By the time Dr. Otis was winding down his medical practice in the 1980's, two family practice physicians had taken over. They covered the ED in 48-hour shifts, delivered babies, and even rode in the ambulance alongside an unstable patient up to the old Mary Hitchcock Hospital in Hanover, New Hampshire. On night runs, the doc might catch some shut eye in the gurney on the return trip to be in the office to see patients come morning. But with the rapid development of medicines and protocols to manage hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and diabetes came an increased demand for office visits. The "every-doctor-does-ev-

erything" model of health care gave way to dedicated ED providers, hospitalists, and primary care specialists.

Currently, sixteen board certified providers staff the clinic. In the last year, these family practice physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and mental health providers managed 30,000 patient visits. Meanwhile, the waitlist to become a patient at GCFH exceeds four hundred. Unlike almost every other primary care facility in the country, however, it's not because there aren't enough practitioners, but because there isn't enough space.

The clinic is housed in two pre-Civil War buildings that have been renovated so often that all that remains of the original structures are their narrow halls and uneven floors. There are too few exam rooms, no conference room, and climate can range from tropical to arctic from one room to



another. When conversations regarding a serious diagnosis and treatment options take place between a provider, patient, and family, it ties up one of these too few exam rooms others are waiting to use. Sometimes patients are screened in the hall.

Currently, clinicians share office space and nurses share desks. One practitioner does have her own office; the



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room has no window. In any other building, this would be called a closet. The need for more exam rooms, more office space, a conference room, level floors, and hallways that meet ADA standards are not only a matter of comfort, but also a matter of service. A logical floor plan with modern systems would allow sorely needed efficiencies. Happily, such improvements are in the works.

Thanks to a five-million-dollar seed grant from Terry and Joe Pollio of Grafton, the design-stage is complete, and all the necessary state permits and regulatory approvals are in hand. Grace Cottage is now looking toward a new generation of donors to help raise 24 million dollars to build and furnish the building. Construction will begin in June 2027.

With a comfortable waiting room, multiple

exam rooms, a conference room, and office space, the new building will allow current staff to serve more patients with greater ease, comfort, and accessibility. Elevators will bring patients from the ground level entrance to the new clinic, which will be on the same level as dining services, laboratory, radiology, and hospital via a wide, well-lit hallway.

The new clinic building isn't only a win for patients at GCFH; it's a win for everyone who lives, visits, or passes through Southern Vermont, a gateway to the state. Even though the population of Windham County is only 45,000, nearly a half million visitors stopped at the Vermont Information Center in Guilford last year, more than at any other Vermont welcome center. Many of the people who access health care at GCFH are the same people who build homes, plow snow, serve meals, and run ski lifts. All the commu-

nities that make the West River Valley vibrant and welcoming depend on Grace Cottage for care.

Grace Cottage is one of the largest employers in Windham County outside of Brattleboro and is beloved near and far. Locally, Grace Cottage has been repeatedly voted "Best Place to Work" in the *Brattleboro Reformer's* Readers' Choice Awards. Grace Cottage has earned statewide recognition as a "Best Place to Work" in *Vermont Business Magazine's* annual survey conducted by Workforce Research Group, which evaluates workplace policies, practices, demographics, and employees' experience. Remarkably, Grace Cottage is the only hospital or healthcare system in Vermont to receive this award, and it has done so four years in a row.



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Timothy Shafer, M.D., with Grace Cottage since 1984, has received the Vermont Academy of Family Physicians Distinguished Service Award.

Grace Cottage has also earned the highest score in Vermont for LGBTQ+ on the Healthcare Equality Index evaluated by the Human Rights Campaign. Only the UVM Medical Center and the VA Medical

Center, the two largest medical centers in the state, scored as well.

Most prestigious of all, Grace Cottage is the only hospital in all New England to be recognized by the National Rural Health Association for excellence in rural healthcare. What these awards affirm is what makes Grace Cottage Family Health special: patients feel cared for and the excellent staff feel appreciated.

By staying true to its mission "To serve the healthcare needs of our community; to promote wellness, relieve suffering, and restore health," Grace Cottage is leading the way in primary care. As Tim Shafer, M.D., now in his forty-third year at Grace Cottage, says, "Patients receive kind, thorough, unhurried, cheerful care here. Our wrap-around approach with a community health team

includes social services beyond the patient visit. We don't just take care of our patients' medical problems. We know them because we're neighbors. And we care for whole families for two-, three-, sometimes four- generations—entire clans. The medical industry is trying to reinvent the kind of care we've been doing all along by implementing what they call 'a medical home.' Grace Cottage has always been a medical home. What we need is a new house."

While the clinic building will change, the culture of care at Grace Cottage Family Health will continue to focus on preventative health and primary care for everyone in all seasons. ■

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