

Vital Signs

Working Together for Better Care

KAWEAH HEALTH AND
STANFORD HEALTH CARE

*Michael McLean, M.D.
Cardiothoracic Surgery*



Vital Signs

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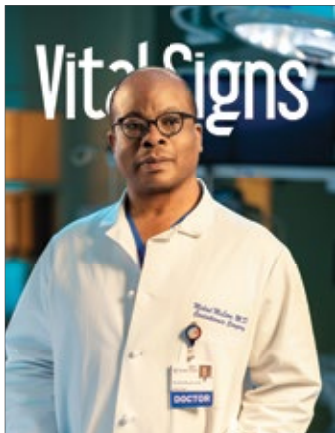
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4

A HEALTHY HEART IS A GREAT START.

CELEBRATE HEART MONTH
BY KEEPING YOUR HABITS
HEALTHY IN 2024.

6

A CLEARER VIEW TO SUCCESS

DOCTORS AND
FOUNDATION ARE
WORKING TOGETHER
TOWARD BETTER
OUTCOMES.

9

BUILDING BETTER CARE THROUGH A STRONG FOUNDATION

KAWEAH HEALTH
FOUNDATION PLAYS A
CRITICAL ROLE IN BETTER
OUTCOMES.

10

A JOURNEY TO RECOVERY

BETTY BORETTI BRAVELY
FACES THE BATTLE OF
HER LIFE.

12

WORKING TOGETHER FOR BETTER CARE

KAWEAH HEALTH
AND STANFORD
HEALTH CARE:
PROVIDING ADVANCED
CARDIOTHORACIC
SURGERY

14

COMPASSION FOR COMMUNITY

KAWEAH HEALTH'S
POPULATION HEALTH
TEAM IS CHANGING
LIVES, ONE STORY AT
A TIME.

18

A GIFT OF LIFE

ORGAN AND TISSUE
DONATION PROGRAM
TOUCHES LIVES ACROSS
CALIFORNIA.

20

FROM LOCAL SCRIBE TO FACULTY PHYSICIAN

GOLDEN WEST HIGH
SCHOOL GRADUATE'S
INSPIRING JOURNEY AT
KAWEAH HEALTH

22

A STRONG FOUNDATION OF SUPPORT

KAWEAH HEALTH
HOSPICE
FOUNDATION BUILDS
A LEGACY FOR ALL.

ON THE COVER

Dr. Michael McLean is
the first of three Stanford
Medicine cardiothoracic
surgeons who will live and
work in Visalia.

LETTER FROM THE CEO

The end of 2023 marked another chapter of growth and change at Kaweah Health. While we saw many positive signs in our day-to-day operations, other challenges arose that we will continue rising to meet. Throughout the many challenges Kaweah Health has faced in recent years, I can truly say that I am honored to work with such a dedicated and resilient team who remain focused on providing the best care possible to our community. The work of everyone at Kaweah Health continues to inspire me and hopefully our local community as well.

I am very happy to report that Kaweah Health's financial condition continues to improve and stabilize. In the first five months of the new fiscal year, we have outperformed our budget, generated a modest profit, and increased our number of days cash on hand (an important measure of liquidity and balance sheet strength). By comparison, our bottom line is more than \$30 million above this time last year. This financial stabilization is a testament to the strong team at Kaweah Health who has been able to create solutions across all of our departments to help put us "back in the black". While recovering from the global pandemic is a difficult process, we see that we can actually emerge as a stronger, more resilient organization.

In October, Governor Newsom signed Senate Bill 525, requiring a mandatory \$25 minimum wage for all employees of the health care sector by 2033 or sooner. The bill will absolutely create funding challenges for all hospitals, but especially ones serving rural communities or high Medi-Cal patient volumes. Since signing the bill, Governor Newsom has publicly stated he is seeking major reforms to the law, in an effort to reduce its \$4 billion cost to the State in the face of a record \$38 billion budget deficit. The first pay increases were scheduled for June, but Newsom wants to delay them until the state's fiscal outlook is healthier. It is unclear what the changes will be, but we remain strongly opposed to SB 525 and are deeply concerned about its long- and short-term financial impacts.

Without question, Kaweah Health greatly values and appreciates its employees. Over many years our hospital has worked hard to create a supportive environment and recognize employees for the life-saving work they do. As a not-for-profit, community hospital, our profits aren't deposited into investors' accounts. Our profits go back into caring for the community and taking care of our employees. Although I am greatly disappointed with the supporters of SB 525 and their lack of a more-measured solution to solving staffing and quality of care issues, I will continue working hard to increase revenues and advocate for higher Medi-Cal reimbursement rates in order to pay our employees the highest wages possible.

In our ongoing effort to improve the quality and access to the best care possible in our community, we are very excited to announce our new affiliation with the Stanford Medicine Cardiac Surgery Program. As part of that affiliation, we welcomed Dr. Michael K. McLean in October. Dr. McLean is a board-certified cardiothoracic surgeon and Stanford Medicine faculty member who brings more life-saving heart surgery and advanced heart care to the residents of Tulare County.

I am also happy to announce the Kaweah Health Medical Clinic on Plaza Drive is now open and offering occupational medicine, workers' compensation medicine, and more in the Industrial Park area of Visalia. As we expand services there, look for primary care and prompt care in the future. Please remember that you can support quality healthcare in your community by using the excellent primary and specialty care, clinics, labs, testing, and more that are available locally. Kaweah Health is proud to offer high-quality care close to home, and we are committed to serving all people of Tulare County.



Gary Herbst

Chief Executive Officer of
Kaweah Health

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A Healthy Heart is a Great Start.

Celebrate Heart Month by keeping your habits healthy in 2024.

Hearth disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States, so bringing awareness and encouraging people to take care of their hearts and seek regular medical check-ups is a priority to keep our community healthy. That is why every February in the United States is Heart Month, a month dedicated to raising awareness about cardiovascular health and encouraging people to take steps toward a healthier lifestyle. Kaweah Health observes heart month by sharing life-saving information and taking part in community events to raise awareness and promote a heart-healthy lifestyle.

It is never too late to take better care of your heart. Here are some simple ways you can ensure your heart is getting the exercise and support it needs.

Get Moving

Regular physical activity is a key component of maintaining a healthy heart. It can help to lower your blood pressure, improve your cholesterol levels, and reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes.

There are many different ways to get regular exercise, and the best type of activity for you depends on your individual needs and preferences. If you're new to exercise, start slowly and gradually increase the amount of time and intensity of your workouts over time. Some easy ways to incorporate more exercise into

your routine include taking a daily 20-minute walk, joining a fitness class, riding your bike for local errands, doing yard work or gardening, or playing sports with friends or family.

Eat Healthily

Embracing a heart-healthy diet is vital for the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, representing a key step in fostering overall well-being. Prioritize nutrient-rich foods, including a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins in your meals to provide essential vitamins and minerals, which promote cardiovascular health. Reduce salt and sugar intake, as they are linked to heightened risks of hypertension and heart-related issues. Choose healthier cooking methods, like grilling or steaming, to enhance the heart-protecting nutrients of your dietary choices. With just a few changes, you can fortify your cardiovascular health and take steps toward a better overall well-being.

Know Your Numbers

Regularly schedule comprehensive checkups with your healthcare provider to monitor vital indicators like blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Understanding these numbers allows for a more precise assessment of your cardiovascular risk and helps your doctor create a personalized plan for improving your heart health. If necessary, your doctor may refer you to a cardiologist for specialized testing and further care to ensure the right approach to taking care of your heart.

Get Involved

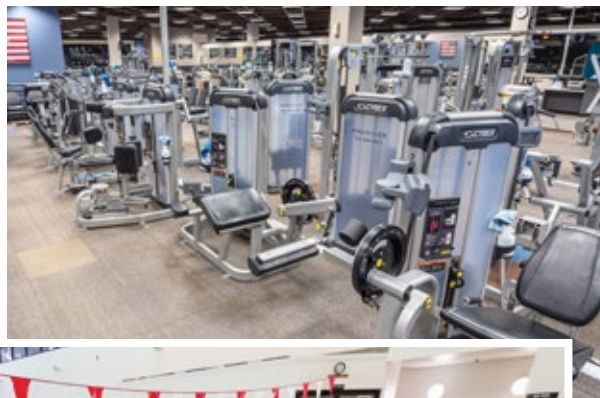
The goal of Heart Month is to remind people how important their heart is to overall health and inspire them to make a commitment to better cardiovascular health. Kaweah Health hopes that through education, lifestyle changes, and local events, our community can make a difference in the ongoing battle against heart disease, promoting a healthier and happier future for all.

Join the Gym

One of the best things you can do to stay healthy is join a gym. The Kaweah Health Lifestyle Fitness Center is Visalia's largest gym, spanning two stories and providing a wide range of facilities, classes, and services to its many happy members. With outstanding features like an indoor track, pools, and hardwood basketball court, what truly distinguishes this gym is its status as the only medically-based fitness facility in Visalia. This means members have access to qualified, certified, and experienced fitness professionals who can assist in achieving their health and fitness objectives. The gym offers personalized exercise programs designed by an exercise physiologist, tailored to individual health and fitness requirements. Members also enjoy wellness checks, fitness profiles, and program designs anytime, and at no extra cost. Whether you are an experienced athlete or embarking on the initial stages of your fitness journey, the Lifestyle Fitness Center has something valuable to offer to everyone on a quest to stay healthy. **KH**

Lifestyle Fitness Center can help you keep your heart in top shape with some of the best facilities around:

- Indoor pools
- Hardwood basketball court
- Exercise studios
- Circuit weight training
- Cardiovascular conditioning
- Cardio theaters
- Climbing wall
- Indoor soccer
- Indoor track
- Volleyball
- Locker rooms/showers
- Saunas/spas
- Massage therapy
- Kids Zone (child care)
- Wireless internet
- Pro shop
- Cafe



DID YOU KNOW?

Each day, your heart beats about 100,000 times and pumps 2,000 gallons of blood.



The audible beating sound your heart makes is from the clap of valve leaflets opening and closing.

Members at Lifestyle Fitness Center enjoy the widest range of gym equipment available in the area.

Heated, indoor pools means members can swim and exercise year-round in comfort.



A Clearer View to Success

Doctors and Foundation are working together toward better outcomes.

▲ Dr. Kyle Potts is using a new scanning device in the fight against breast cancer.

All across Kaweah Health's many departments, you will find different people who work both on the front lines and behind the scenes to help save lives. Of course, there are the doctors, nurses, technologists, and other people you see, but there are also scientists, technicians, social workers, recruiters, planners, and more who have the same goal of caring for the community. These groups work together every day, sometimes in surprising ways.

In the early fall of 2023, Kaweah Health's Chief Strategy Officer Marc Mertz and Director of Physician Recruitment/Relations J.C. Palermo were meeting with Visalia breast surgeon, Kyle Potts, MD, when they asked him if there was anything he needed to help him provide better outcomes to patients. Dr. Potts immediately thought of a new machine he had recently seen at a conference — a CT (3D) breast specimen imaging machine by a company named Clarix. The machine allows doctors to load a surgically-removed tumor from a breast cancer patient and scan it while still in the

operating room, providing a highly detailed, 3D image in just three minutes.

Coincidentally, Dr. Potts and fellow breast surgeon Carol Machado, MD, had recently been talking about getting new technology that could give them better and faster imaging capability during surgery. And while Dr. Potts appreciated the support from the hospital's administration, he didn't have any expectations. "I thought it was great they were interested in helping, but honestly I thought we were just talking about things," says Dr. Potts.

Following the meeting, Mertz went to work behind the scenes, "After learning about the Clarix machine, I thought how great it would be if we could get one," he says. "So, I took the idea to Kaweah Health Foundation Director Liz Wynn. The foundation has been instrumental in getting new, cutting-edge equipment for Kaweah Health." Mertz is absolutely correct. Since its founding in 1979, Kaweah Health Foundation has raised more than \$74 million for life-saving equipment supporting neurosurgery, neonatal intensive care, cardiac surgery, breast health, acute care, cancer radiation treatment, and more. Wynn and the foundation board were very interested in learning more about this

new tool to help women fighting breast cancer, and the timing was ideal. “When Marc (Mertz) brought the idea to us, we were getting ready for our Think Pink fundraising campaign for Breast Cancer Awareness month in October,” says Wynn. “So, I invited Suzie Potts, Dr. Potts’ wife, to come and present at our next board meeting.” During the presentation, Suzie showed the board members the benefits of the machine, highlighting the positive impacts it would have for patients: shorter surgical times, less time under anesthesia, fewer follow-up surgeries, and faster recovery times.

The presentation made a strong impression, inspiring the board to act immediately. “After learning about the machine, the board members and I were really excited — two of them representing Graham and Associates and the Sence Foundation immediately stepped up to provide matching funds to help purchase the machine,” recalls Wynn. The board took a leap of faith and approved the purchase of the equipment prior to all the funds being raised. “The board believed that every week delayed was a week a breast cancer patient missed out on this amazing technology,” says Wynn. “Dr. Potts and Dr. Machado might perform more than 20 lumpectomies combined every week.”

Thanks to the passion of the board and dedication of the foundation, Dr. Potts and Dr. Machado were using the new machine to help evaluate cancerous tumors taken from patients by late November. As hoped, it only took a few cases before the machine showed its worth. During one of Dr. Potts’ first few surgeries using the new technology, the clear image showed that more tissue needed to be removed from the patient, likely preventing a second surgery.

Dr. Potts is both grateful and impressed by the quick work of the foundation to bring this new technology to the hospital. “I can’t say enough about Kaweah and the foundation,” he says. “We are very fortunate to have them in the community. They are helping to bring the best technology available to our patients.” Right now, Kaweah Health is one of only three hospital systems in California with this technology, and the only one north of Southern California.

Dr. Potts is a Visalia native and has been a general surgeon in Visalia for almost 20 years.



When he started his career, he did a variety of procedures, and over time he has become one of the most trusted breast surgeons in the Central Valley, with medical breast procedures representing about 95 percent of his work. In his career he has seen the field of breast surgery greatly evolve. “It’s become very specialized and the techniques have developed tremendously,” he says. “It has led to a much higher skill level in surgeons and much better outcomes for patients.” Dr. Potts does about 10-15 procedures each week including biopsies and lumpectomies, helping hundreds of women in their battles against cancer each year.

Dr. Potts’ patients truly appreciate his experience, expertise, compassion, and honesty. When Sally Rogers first met with Dr. Potts in 2018, she was seen because of an abnormal mammogram result. “I was able to meet with Dr. Potts throughout my journey, starting before my diagnosis,” she

▲ Dr. Kyle Potts demonstrates how tissue samples can be scanned during surgery without having to leave the operating room.

◀ Dr. Carol Machado (L) and Dr. Kyle Potts are improving outcomes for breast cancer patients through new technology.

— “
It’s an absolute game changer. This is the future of breast cancer treatment right here in Tulare County.
” —

Dr. Potts on the new portable CT scanner



▲ Dr. Potts meets annually with patient Sally Rogers after her successful cancer treatment and surgery in 2018.

says. “I was so scared at first, I just told him to remove both breasts, I didn’t care.” Dr. Potts was quick to calm Sally down and clearly explain everything about her case, what they knew, what they might find out, and exactly what her care plan

success rates well in the 90 percent range,” says Dr. Potts. “That’s why it’s so important for women to do an annual checkup and mammogram.”

The biggest challenge in breast cancer surgery is referred to as margin status. When a cancerous tumor is surgically removed, about 8 milliliters of normal tissue surrounding the tumor is also removed, called a margin. On average, about 30 percent of breast cancer surgery patients have to come back for additional surgery because cancerous tissue was present at the margin but not visible via x-ray. “For a long time, Dr. Machado and I had been talking about getting some kind of new technology to help us reduce the rate of additional surgeries,” says Dr. Potts. “If we

could reduce that rate by half, it would make a huge difference to so many patients.”

Being able to clearly see the widths of the margin is the key to removing all of the cancerous tissue. With traditional 2D imaging, measuring the margins around the tumor is difficult



▲ Behind every great doctor is an equally great team.

Dr. Potts’ staff, L-R: Evelynn Martin-Navarro, Mariela Gallo, Dr. Potts, Melanie Mullis.

Not pictured: Suzie Potts

would be. Leading into her surgery, Sally was in a much different frame of mind. “The only way to explain it is that I felt completely safe. He was so clear about everything and answered every question I had,” she recalls. “And all of his staff were so amazing. They really do care about you.” After her successful treatment, Sally is cancer free, but still comes to an annual check in with Dr. Potts. “Early-stage cancer treatment is highly effective, with

because doctors can only view a single, flat image. The margins under and above the tumor are hidden or obscured, and surgeons must rely on their skill and experience to remove the right amount of tissue. A 3D image, however, is made of hundreds of individual scans taken from multiple angles and stitched together using software, creating a final image which can be rotated, easily viewed, and measured from all sides. This 3D image removes most doubt about the margin status. “It’s an absolute game changer,” says Dr. Potts. “The ability to completely see the tumor you are working on in 3D is such an advantage. We can precisely and clearly visualize

the exact location and details of a tumor and confidently determine and confirm all traces of a breast cancer tumor have been removed.” Dr. Potts emphasizes the high quality of care available here in Tulare County. “You don’t have to go to Stanford or Fresno. You don’t have to go out of the area to continue your treatment. Kaweah Health is keeping the technology up to date here so we can continue to provide some of the best breast care.” KH

Building Better Care Through a Strong Foundation

Every day of the year, the Kaweah Health Foundation works to support the mission of Kaweah Health in providing world-class health care to the community, saving countless lives in the process. As the only hospital in Visalia, and the only trauma center between Fresno and Bakersfield, it is vital that Kaweah Health has the space and equipment needed to treat all of its patients for many different conditions. The comprehensive care available today is supported in large part by the generous community and the Kaweah Health Foundation's tireless efforts. Money is raised through capital campaigns, grants from companies, the annual Golf Classic event, and beneficiary designations from wills and trusts.

The Think Pink campaign that helped pay for the Clarix 3D imaging

machine was designed to raise awareness for breast cancer during National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, observed each year in October. In addition to raising awareness, the foundation also assists uninsured cancer patients by helping to pay for procedures such as biopsies or follow-up ultrasounds, as well as surgical comfort needs such as head coverings, compression garments, and wigs. "So many people have someone in their lives who has been touched by breast cancer," Wynn says. "These patients are already in a very tough emotional situation, and we want to be able to help them in any way possible."

Wynn emphasizes the strength and passion of the foundation staff and the many generous organizations who supported the Think Pink campaign.

"We are a team and all worked to raise awareness at the many community events we attended during October," she says. "Our support came from everywhere: Visalia Mall, Casey De Anda Realtor, Human Bean, Lost Girls Motorcycle Club, Ruiz Foods, City of Visalia Police Department, and so many more community groups and members. We are very grateful to all of them." KH

Learn more about Kaweah Health Foundation and how you can offer support at [KawahHealth.org/Pink](https://www.kawahhealth.org/Pink).

Did you know...

1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetime?



Donate Today!
[KawahHealth.org/Pink](https://www.kawahhealth.org/Pink)





A Journey to Recovery

Betty and James Boretti started a fundraiser to honor the Kaweah Health staff who helped save her life.

Betty Boretti bravely faces the battle of her life.

Following a routine mammogram in November 2022, Betty Boretti was called back for a biopsy, which is normal when the results of a mammogram suggest there might be abnormal or cancerous tissue. During a biopsy, the doctor removes small pieces of breast tissue from the suspicious area so they can be analyzed in the lab to see if they contain cancer cells. Just after Christmas 2022, Betty received the call — the analysis showed it was definitely cancerous. On top of that, there were some lumps under her arm as well because the cancer had started to migrate, technically referred to as stage two breast cancer. For Betty, the diagnosis came out of the blue and left her shocked. “It was very scary,” she remembers. “I kept asking myself why it happened to me.” But soon after the initial disbelief, and with the support of her husband James, they changed their focus. “We took a deep breath, acknowledged the information we received, and just started going forward to do what we needed to do to fight it,” she says.

When James Boretti moved to Visalia 20 years ago after marrying Betty, he didn’t know much about Kaweah Health, but he has seen it grow in size over the years, along with its reputation. After weighing their options for treating Betty, they decided to stay in Visalia. “We chose to go to Dr. Havad at the Sequoia Regional Cancer Center because of the experience, knowledge, compassion, and skills that he, the nursing, and medical staff all have,” he says. Sequoia Regional Cancer Center in Visalia is one of California’s most advanced cancer treatment facilities. The center offers patients a multidisciplinary approach to cancer care through the combined efforts of surgeons, radiologists, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, and other caregivers.

Betty’s treatment date was set to begin February 1, 2023. Doctors inserted a small chemotherapy port through one of her veins, which would deliver the medicine directly into her veins. When Betty was coming out of surgery, however, the staff was not able to wake her up, and they soon noticed complications. Betty was immediately transferred to Kaweah Health, where she underwent emergency open-heart

surgery to save her life.

Within only three hours, Betty had gone from a chemotherapy appointment to life-saving open heart surgery. “I am so thankful I was in a place where I could receive such responsive attention and care,” says Betty. “The skill level of the staff, both the medical and nursing staff, was incredible. I just feel fortunate.” She remained at Kaweah Health Medical Center for six days, three of which were in the intensive care unit, before moving into another area prior to discharge.

Five weeks later, Betty started her chemotherapy while coordinating visits from home health, who was helping her get back into walking and preparing her for the chemotherapy she was starting. The first phase of chemo went well, but the second phase was very difficult. “Betty fought really hard, and I’m very proud of her,” says James. “From the beginning, the doctor told us it’s going to be a journey — not an easy one — but a journey we can make.” One year later, there are not many signs left from her journey other than a scar from the open-heart surgery. Betty has recovered very well and is back to her normal life from before.

Betty’s journey was an emotional one, and while she was recovering from the open-heart surgery and preparing for chemotherapy, she felt incredibly grateful for the doctors and nurses who had cared for her during and after her heart surgery. As a token of her gratitude, she decided to do a pay-it-forward fundraiser benefiting Kaweah Health. “There are a lot of technological advances, a lot of advances in the medicine Kaweah Health Medical Center provides, and I want to support that,” says Betty. “We know this is a way to help other people who end up in situations like my wife did.” The funding will go towards state-of-the-art cardiac surgical lights and monitors. **KH**

Learn more about Betty and James’ fundraiser at [KawahHealth.org/Pink](https://www.kawahhealth.org/pink).



Offer a lasting thanks.

The Kaweah Health Reflection Garden is approaching its final phase. Situated near the Acequia entrance, the garden will offer staff and visitors a beautiful space to reflect and restore. At its center is a monument to life. Engraved in English and Spanish, the verse is a tribute to life and our devoted caregivers who work so passionately to protect it.

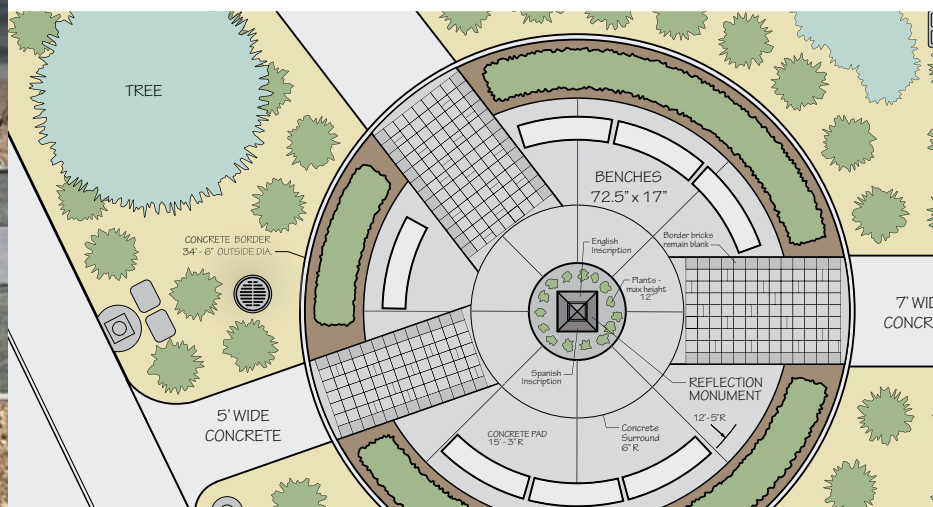


We are currently offering employees and the public a chance to honor our caregivers through the purchase of engraved pavers. These decorative stones will be displayed on the three approaches to the garden.

If you've been looking for a unique way to thank a co-worker who goes the extra mile, or honor that nurse who went above and beyond for you or a family member, this is your chance. Pavers may also be given as a gift.

Be a part of this tribute to life. To order or request more information, call the Kaweah Health Foundation at (559) 624-2359.

The reflection garden project was initiated in 2021 by Kaweah Health nursing staff. Its construction is being funded through donations from employees and community members to the Kaweah Health Foundation. The drought tolerant landscaping was donated by Cal Water. No general funds will be used for the construction of this project.





Working Together for Better Care

Kaweah Health and Stanford Health Care: Providing advanced cardiothoracic surgery

▲ Dr. Frederick Mayer was instrumental in establishing Kaweah Health's Cardiothoracic Surgery Program in 1995.

Kaweah Health is excited to welcome the first surgeon from its new affiliation with the Stanford Health Care Cardiac Surgery Program. Michael K. McLean, MD, arrived in Visalia in October 2023 and is now performing life-saving heart and thoracic surgical procedures such as heart bypass surgery, heart valve repair, and more. Dr. McLean is the first of three Stanford Medicine cardiothoracic surgeons who will live and work in Visalia as part of the Kaweah Health Cardiothoracic Surgery Program, working together with the Stanford Health Care Cardiac Surgery Program.

Establishing an affiliation with an academic medical center is no small endeavor and requires the work of many people over many months. Kaweah Health Chief Strategy Officer Marc Mertz explains the origins of the idea. "Part of my job is to look into the future and find places where we need to grow and find ideas that will help Kaweah Health continue to provide high-quality care long into the future," says Mertz. "One of the main challenges we face is providing enough care to meet demand, and this is definitely true of cardiac surgery." Mertz worked with Stanford Medicine representatives for nine months in the effort to bring more heart surgeons to Kaweah Health. The result was

an affiliation that would bring a total of three, highly-skilled heart surgeons to Visalia, all working and living here full time. “It’s an important step in increasing access to the highest-quality, innovative care that meets current technological advances,” says Mertz. In addition to being full-time surgeons, these doctors will also serve as faculty members at Stanford Medicine.

Dr. McLean and the future doctors from Stanford Medicine will be based at the Kaweah Health Cardiothoracic Surgery Clinic on Main Street in downtown Visalia and perform surgery at Kaweah Health Medical Center. In cases where Kaweah Health does not provide direct services (for example, very complex open-heart surgeries or heart transplants), the doctors from Stanford Medicine in Visalia will help facilitate patient transfers to Stanford Health Care in Stanford, California. So far, Dr. McLean has settled in quickly, performing open-heart surgery within his first few days in Visalia. “It’s been very smooth — the staff, technicians, and facilities here are excellent,” he says. “The need for open heart surgery in this area is high, so it’s important to provide more access. I’m excited to be here.”

Kaweah Health’s Cardiothoracic Surgery Program was established in 1995 and has grown to become a nationally-recognized leader in the region, providing life-saving heart and thoracic surgery procedures to patients. The program is led by Frederick W. Mayer, MD, a board-certified cardiothoracic surgeon with more than 40 years of experience. Dr. Mayer is widely recognized as an expert in cardiac surgery and has been instrumental in developing the cardiothoracic surgery program at Kaweah Health from the beginning. “I started the cardiac program here in 1995, and we did our first open heart surgery in 1996. I’m quite pleased with the program and

what we’ve provided,” states Dr. Mayer. To date, the cardiothoracic program at Kaweah Health has performed more than 8,000 open-heart surgeries. The program consists of a multidisciplinary team that includes cardiothoracic surgeons, cardiologists, nurse practitioners, nurses, surgical techs, perfusionists, cath lab techs, and sonographers. This team works together to provide a continuum of care for heart patients, from diagnosis

and treatment to rehabilitation and follow-up. The program also offers a variety of support services for patients and their families, including cardiac rehabilitation, nutrition counseling, and stress management.

Looking forward, Dr. Mayer is pleased with the new affiliation. “Having Dr. McLean here and working with Stanford Medicine is going to help recruit some of the best cardiac surgeons around. This is going to be an amazing benefit to Visalia and the Central Valley, to have local access to this level of heart care for many years to come.”

In addition to Stanford Health Care, Kaweah Health maintains an affiliation with the nationally recognized Cleveland Clinic Heart, Vascular & Thoracic Institute. These affiliations allow Kaweah Health’s heart program to share best practices in patient care, outcomes, quality reporting, and offer patients access to the broadest possible range of solutions from skilled, experienced doctors, nurses, and technicians. **KH**



Dr. Michael McLean is a Stanford Medicine heart surgeon and Stanford faculty member living and working in Visalia. He specializes in heart bypass surgery, valve repair, and other advanced cardiac procedures.

Heart Surgery Terminology

- **Cardiothoracic surgery** — Refers to surgery on the heart, lungs, and chest
- **Minimally-invasive surgery** — Surgery on the heart using small incisions
- **Open heart surgery** — Surgeries such as coronary bypass and aortic aneurysm repair
- **Bypass surgery** — A surgery that attaches a graft above and below a blocked artery, sending blood around the blockage
- **Heart valve surgery** — A surgery to fix common problems like narrowing valve openings and leaking valves
- **Septal defect surgery** — Septal defects are holes in the heart that allow blood to flow to parts of the heart and lungs where it should not. These defects are repaired by stitching or patching the hole.

Learn more about Kaweah Health’s heart surgery program at KaweahHealth.org/HeartSurgery.



Compassion for Community

Kaweah Health's Population Health team is changing lives, one story at a time.

Some of the most inspiring stories coming out of Kaweah Health do not come from inside the hospital's walls, but from the outside, in public spaces and the streets. That is because behind the busy scenes of Kaweah Health's emergency room and clinics is a team dedicated to a cause that goes beyond traditional health care, dedicated to changing the lives of people who are at risk in the community no matter where they are.

The Population Health Department at Kaweah Health is working every day to transform lives in profound ways. Many Tulare County residents may not be aware of the impactful work done by this department, work that illustrates Kaweah Health's commitment to serving the

community and improving health outcomes for everyone.

The work Population Health does is part of California's CalAIM program aimed at improving care and outcomes for Medi-Cal members. The program prioritizes addressing homelessness and mental health, using Enhanced Care Management (ECM) and Community Supports (CS) to help members navigate these public services to get the help they need.

The primary focus of ECM is supporting members in managing multiple chronic health conditions, connect patients to primary care and specialty care, and reduce emergency room visits. While CS prioritizes finding housing and addressing the needs of those facing homelessness, many times there are other issues involved like mental health challenges, substance abuse,



The population health team reaches deep into the community.

Front, L-R: Cristalia Nunez, Nalor See, Maria Carbajal, Ellie Casas, Viviana Arroyo, Maricela Silva-Aguilar, Crystal Ortiz, Sylvia Reyna, Jessica Gutierrez, Sonia Duran-Aguilar

Back, L-R: Linda Gonzales, Laura Palomino, Devon Barlow, Emilio Montti Lopez, Marianita Arrizon, Noah Camacho, Blanca Aldaco, Freddie Romero, Jasmine Cortez-Quiroz, Miguel Esquivel, Omar Godoy.

Not pictured: Kayla Jacobo Enriquez, Irene Taff, Vivian Reyes


and frequent emergency department visits or hospital admissions. Kaweah Health Population Health Manager Crystal Ortiz estimates about 90 percent of the people her team works with have some type of mental health issue, often paired with substance abuse. “It can be a difficult situation for the members, but we know how to put them on a path to a better life,” she says. “Our team is so knowledgeable and compassionate — we truly care about the people we work to help. We all have a strong desire to help people.”

The many arms of Kaweah Health’s Population Health team are the community care coordinators (CCCs). They are the ones in the field, making contact with and guiding members of the community to better health and better lives. Most CCCs are stationed at Kaweah Health’s clinics, mental health facilities, and emergency

room, where they work proactively with individuals in need. Crystal explains how they reach people in need, “Our CCCs find people in different ways. Many are referred by providers or health plans, others come from emergency room visits. Sometimes we even receive a call that there is someone on the corner who looks like they need help.”

For those without housing or who are at risk, Kaweah Health’s Population Health team uses a comprehensive, whole-person approach to care. CCCs first coordinate individuals’ care, linking them to necessary treatment for physical and mental health conditions, substance use disorders, and other essential services. The goal is not only to provide medical assistance to members in need, but also to address the underlying social issues impacting their health. In addition to guiding members to the help they need, CCCs also teach members about the different services available and how to go about getting them.

Each CCC carries a caseload of 40 members. A typical day involves reviewing cases and trying to contact each member at least once a month. While working with members, CCCs connect them to primary care and social services. “We talk to them and try to understand what their needs are,” says Crystal. “From there, CCCs create a plan that might cover many areas: counseling, doctor appointments, or social services appointments. Then they provide the support to help the members succeed.” That support ranges from accompanying members to medical appointments, helping them secure identification and social security benefits, or just giving them a ride.

Helping members reach greater health and stability is not a one-visit process. For many of the successes the Population Health team celebrates, they have invested at least a year of time and attention, often longer, to reach these milestones. Each one of the successes is a testament to the team’s dedication, time, and effort. For countless Tulare County community members, Kaweah Health’s Population Health team is making a lasting difference and changing lives. 

— “ —

Our team is so knowledgeable and compassionate — we truly care about the people we work to help. We all have a strong desire to help people.

— ” —

Population Health Manager Crystal Ortiz on her team of community care coordinators

Positive Change.

Our Population Health team is making a difference in our community and in people's lives. The following is just a sample of the 2023 success stories made possible by their work.

Names have been changed.

2023 Journal

Monica and Joey. Unhoused for five years. Dealing with social and health-related obstacles. Veronica requires regular dialysis. Jeffrey battles depression. We were able to secure social security cards and identification for them. Placed first in a transitional housing facility (Eden House) — later to a more permanent solution at The Lofts.

Alisha. Living in a toxic environment at a room and board facility. The Kaweah Health Client Services (CS) team helped her find suitable housing. With assistance, she was able to secure her own apartment in Woodlake.

Sandra. Living on the streets. Successfully transitioned into a one-bedroom apartment. Housing opportunity was made possible through The Housing Choice Voucher program. Her new home was fully furnished through the No Place Like Home program (NPLH). Thank you NPLH!

Richard, his significant other, and two daughters — Unhoused and living in an abandoned trailer. The CS team assisted the family in securing a house and other health services. Richard and his family are now in stable housing and no longer in distress.

Jeanette, mother of four. Residing in a shelter when met by the CS team. Jeanette and her children are now comfortable and safe in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment, fully furnished through NPLH.

Annie. Residing in her car, on a friend's couch, and in motels with her two sons. The CS team is actively working on finding housing for her. The home will be furnished by Community Services Employment Training (C-SET).

Isabel and her two daughters. At one time living in their vehicle and motels, they are now in a stable housing arrangement. Their three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment was furnished through the support of C-SET.

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(559) 686-3481



IN VISALIA: [KaweahHealth.org/VisaliaHeart](https://www.KaweahHealth.org/VisaliaHeart)

IN TULARE: [KaweahHealth.org/TulareHeart](https://www.KaweahHealth.org/TulareHeart)



A Gift of Life

Organ and tissue donation program touches lives across California.

▲ Sunny Luna is an organ transplant recipient and advocate for organ donation education.

Sunny Luna is a Visalia native who currently works as a social worker, helping the people of Tulare County. And while she lives a fairly ordinary life by most standards, her life's journey is nothing short of extraordinary.

In 1992, towards the end of her senior year in high school, Sunny's childhood took a dramatic turn when she received a diagnosis of systemic lupus, an autoimmune condition that prompts the body to attack its own tissues and organs. By that time, her kidneys were already being affected by the disease. Despite undergoing intensive treatments including chemotherapy and other medications, both of her kidneys failed shortly after graduating from high school, leading her to undergo dialysis.

In February 1993, Sunny received a call from University of California San Francisco that a kidney was available for her. "As an 18-year old who had been used to a healthy life, all I could think of was that I

would never have to come back to the hospital and be hooked up to a dialysis machine — Was I ever wrong," she remembers. Sunny underwent the procedure, but despite a successful surgery, the transplanted kidney could not resist the lupus infection and failed after only 14 days. Over the following months, Sunny suffered serious complications, including a minor stroke, heart attack, collapsed lungs, and a seizure. She was placed back on dialysis. Despite all of these challenges, Sunny continued taking evening college courses and working towards a degree in social work from California State University, Fresno.

In December 1994, Sunny's father decided to donate his kidney to Sunny. "The experience that time was wonderful," she recalls. "I was out of the hospital within a week, and during my recovery, I spent time with my family, cherishing every moment, and realizing that good health is never to be taken for granted."

Her health improved greatly after that, and Sunny and her husband Chris welcomed the birth of their son Christopher in 2001. Sunny

is still doing well today, employed as a social worker in Visalia.

Across the United States, finding suitable organs for transplant is done by organ procurement organizations (OPOs), not-for-profit organizations responsible for recovering organs from deceased donors for transplantation. Donor Network West (DNW) serves the northern California and Nevada regions. In their service area, there are more than 9,000 patients on the waitlist for organ donation, approximately 1,000 of which are located in the Central Valley. The majority of these patients are in need of kidney transplants, followed by those requiring liver, heart, and lung transplants. The current waiting period for a kidney transplant in California is about eight to ten years.

Fewer than one percent of all potential donors meet the specific medical criteria to become one, and recovered organs need to

topic. DNW works with dozens of counties across Northern California and Nevada, serving more than 13 million people. They meet with community figures, religious leaders, and educators to learn more about their constituents and the best way to educate them about organ donation. Doing more than 50 presentations each year, DNW helps people make informed decisions that could help others in need.

Thanks to the partnership with Donor West, Kaweah Health is able to contribute to this life-saving program. Kaweah Health Director of Critical Care Services Shannon Cauthen oversees the program for the hospital. “We are deeply touched by all of the patients who volunteer to donate organs,” she says. “To honor those patients, we do what is called an Honor Walk, which gives us the chance to rec-



▲ Sunny Luna and family after her son's UC Berkeley graduation, L-R: brother-in-law Aaron, Sunny, son Christopher, and husband Chris.

be used within a short timeframe. If a suitable donor is found, a team of doctors is contacted who quickly fly in to rescue the patient's organs for donation. Immediately after, they fly out and deliver them to patients in need of transplants. It's a highly choreographed sequence of events that saves lives.

For many people, the only information they have received about organ donation is a checkbox on their driver's license application, so it is essential to educate the public about the

ognize and be thankful for the gift of that patient. During the Honor Walk, the house supervisor or charge nurse announces a patient's donation, and the leadership team is invited as well. Up to 100 staff members may come out and line the halls as the patient is transported from the unit. In addition to the Honor Walk, an organ donor flag ceremony is later held with DNW and Kaweah Health staff, and the donor's family. A special flag is raised during a brief ceremony led by a Kaweah Health chaplain. KH

Learn more about organ donation at DonorNetworkWest.org.

DID YOU KNOW?

One person can save up to eight lives by being an organ donor, and they can enhance the lives of as many as 75 others through tissue donation.



▲ The Donate Life flag is raised to honor patients after donating their organs.



From Local Scribe to Faculty Physician

Golden West High School graduate's inspiring journey at Kaweah Health

In the Golden West High School graduating class of 2005, the future Dr. Dries Van Dyk set his sights on becoming a doctor and started working in the Kaweah Health Emergency Department as a scribe, which is someone who helps doctors and nurses by writing down important information during a patient's visit to the hospital. At the time, he wasn't sure where he might end up practicing medicine someday, but he knew he was pointed in the right direction. After finishing medical school in Nevada, the timing was perfect — he was able to do his residency in Visalia, becoming one of Kaweah Health's first emergency medicine residents in 2016, part of the new Graduate Medical Education (GME) program there.


Dr. Van Dyk remembers his excitement on Match Day, the day when medical school graduates are paired with a hospital to do their residency training, "Having grown up in Visalia, it was really

great to be able to do my residency here. Both my parents and my wife's parents are here." Dr. Van Dyk finished his emergency medicine residency, following up with a fellowship in the simulation lab at Kaweah Health.

With his residency complete, Dr. Van Dyk continued working full time in the Kaweah Health Emergency Department, where he enjoyed the challenge and excitement of that environment. "There's something different every day in the ED," he says. "It's a great challenge to your skills and is an exciting place to be." Recently, Dr. Van Dyk was asked to become Kaweah Health's GME Quality Improvement and Patient Safety Director, overseeing and engaging with a number of committees that ensure quality metrics at Kaweah Health Medical Center are met. In this position, Dr. Van Dyk works with all 130 residents in the GME program to complete quality improvement projects,

▲ Dr. Van Dyk appreciates being able to care for the people of his hometown.

which involve monitoring, analyzing, and improving healthcare processes.

Although he was a bit uncertain about what his new teaching duties would be like, he has settled in to the change. "Teaching in the classroom feels like the opposite of working in the emergency department," says Dr. Van Dyk. "The pace is slower, and I can look at more than just the patient in front of me. It's given me a better understanding of the system of care as a whole." One of the many outstanding doctors found throughout the hospital, Dr. Van Dyk is proud to not only serve the community of Tulare County where he grew up, but also the doctors in Kaweah Health's Graduate Medical Education program. 



Care.

**For some, it's an emotion.
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It takes a special person to work for Kaweah Health. We serve a region where the challenges are unique, and the needs are great. But for us, the greater the need, the greater the reward.

Kaweah Health clinical and support staff are part of an organization that delivers a better quality of life for some, and a second chance at life for many. Our employees have the satisfaction of knowing they are making a difference — for individuals, and for their community as a whole.

If you want to use your talents alongside people who face each day with courage and purpose,

in an environment that empowers you to do your absolute best, this is where you belong.

Care. For some, it's an emotion. At Kaweah Health, we put it into action — every day. If you really want to make a difference, visit KaweahHealth.org/Careers.



VISIT: KaweahHealth.org/Careers



A Strong Foundation of Support

Kaweah Health Hospice Foundation builds a legacy for all.

Kaweah Health Hospice Foundation was founded with a vision of providing compassion and support to the community, creating comfort for individuals at their end-of-life journey. Its work is rooted in the belief that every person deserves dignity, comfort, and care during their final journey. Because of its dedicated efforts for more than 35 years, the quality of life for many patients and their families has been greatly enhanced.

Run entirely by volunteers, the foundation's role is to raise funds to help support the services provided by Kaweah Health Hospice and to provide education to the public. The foundation collaborates closely with Kaweah Health Hospice, whose role is to deliver a range of programs and services designed to meet the unique needs of individuals and families navigating their end-of-life-journey. These include grief support for families and children coping with loss, recognizing that the healing process extends beyond the passing of a loved one.

Kaweah Health Hospice Foundation is proud to be the supporting partner of Kaweah Health Hospice and the Kaweah Health Ruth Wood Open Arms House. Both of these programs are a not-for-profit hospice and hospice facility in a field that has grown increasingly for-profit over time. In fact, in 1990, only 5 percent of U.S. hospices were for-profit. Today, for-profits are the majority, representing 63 percent of all hospices. The work of the foundation supports this hospice program that is



▲ Kaweah Health Hospice Foundation members, L-R: Merrilyn Brady, Carol Nickel, Susan Harrell, Barbara Mayeda, Pam Rutter, Kelly Cooper, Robert Urtecho, David Zarate, Donn Ritter, Paul Verissimo, Margaret Moholt, Michelle Ducey. Not pictured: Susan Sevier, Nancy Reimer-Wood, Tina Tetz, Jim Johnson, Mary Ferrera, Mary Gray, and Kim Carsten

not driven by shareholder value, but by exceptional care consistent with patient goals, values, and preferences. All funds raised by the hospice foundation go directly to benefit Kaweah Health Hospice, the Ruth Wood Open Arms House, and its patients.

As a nonprofit, the foundation relies on community support to fund its programs and services. The foundation holds several fundraising initiatives throughout the year, from local events to philanthropic partnerships, helping to ensure all members of the community have access to dignified, end-of-life care, regardless of their ability to pay. Its mission is straightforward — to provide physical, emotional, social, and spiritual support to terminally ill patients, as well as their families and loved ones, while assisting patients and families to live with dignity and comfort as they cope with end-of-life issues.

Foundation board president Michelle Ducey explains how many of the volunteers come to serve. “Many of

our 18-member foundation board have a personal story that links us to the mission. Whether as board members or Kaweah Health Hospice volunteers, many speak of wanting to give back because a loved one had a meaningful experience with our hospice.” Michelle explains. “After the death of my husband 17 years ago, I became a volunteer for that very reason.” The foundation board works together with the hospice team, led by Ryan Howard, MD, and Tiffany Bullock, RN, collaborating and advocating for best practices, equipment, and support to improve care and services for hospice patients and their families. “We are a crucial safety net for the most vulnerable patients in our communities,” says Michelle. Board member Carol Nickel is a former hospice nurse who has been a board member since the early days of the Hospice of Tulare County, which became part of Kaweah Delta Healthcare District in 2003. “It’s been an honor to work with Kaweah Health Hospice Foundation for



Perhaps the biggest contribution to the residents of Tulare County is the Ruth Wood Open Arms House, a unique hospice facility in Visalia. The facility began as an idea after one of the hospice foundation board members saw a new type of hospice facility in San Diego, referred to as a social model hospice home — a house in a typical neighborhood that had been converted into a place for multiple hospice patients. The board members decided they would try to do the same in Visalia, so they formed a nonprofit organization and established the Ruth Wood Open Arms House, named in honor of Ruth Wood, a supporter of hospice for many years and a founder of Hospice of Tulare County in the mid-1980s. The group of board members went about finding a suitable house and eventually found one

Volunteers play a crucial role in maintaining and staffing the Ruth Wood Open Arms House, handling tasks like yard work, answering the door, and more.



◀ Hundreds of people attend an Oct. 2023 event featuring Dr. Ira Byock, speaking on improving care for people living with serious medical conditions.

so long and be a part of its legacy,” she says. “We truly have an exceptional group of people who want to give back to the community.”

One way the hospice foundation gives back is by educating the community. Through events such as the Norman Sharrer Symposium, guest speakers host learning sessions open to hospice and medical workers, as well as the general public. Attendees hear about topics like hospice care and advanced planning from noted authors in the field such as Dr. Ira Byock. The response for these events has been very positive, drawing diverse audiences of up to several hundred people. “I think this is just the beginning of what we want to do, demystifying hospice care and engaging in dialogue with people about care,” says Michelle. “The positive response has proved that the community is really interested in this.”

that would become the Ruth Wood Open Arms House, which opened in 2016. In 2021, the facility transferred ownership to Kaweah Health and continued offering its services to the community.

Since opening under Kaweah Health ownership in July 2022, the Ruth Wood Open Arms House has provided compassionate end-of-life care to more than 100 residents, supported by successful fundraising and community contributions, demonstrating a sustainable model. **KH**

Learn more about the Kaweah Health Hospice Foundation or how to become a volunteer at (559) 624-2359.

To contact Kaweah Health Hospice, call (559) 733-0642.

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