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DREAM JOB

As the founding dean of Seton Hall's new med school,
Bonita Stanton aims to rewrite the book

on health education. **By Leslie Garisto Pfaff**

It was the early 1970s, and Bonita Stanton wanted to change the world. In that respect, she wasn't unlike many in a generation famous for its idealism. But Stanton had a unique plan. She'd apply to Yale's law and medical schools, get an M.D. and a J.D., and then hit the world's injustices with a one-two punch. "I think I envisioned myself, somehow or another, as a prison doctor who would be providing legal counsel," she says, laughing at the audacity of her younger self.

Maybe the idea isn't all that far-fetched. Stanton, a Connecticut native, was accepted into both schools, and Yale created a special six-year program for her. She figured she'd start with med school and get that over with, since law school was going to be so much more fun. Instead, she says, "I fell in love with the medical part and dropped my plans for a JD."

While the prison population may be the worse for that decision, the state of New Jersey is likely to be its beneficiary. In February, Seton Hall University and Hackensack Meridian Health (born of this year's merger between Hackensack University Health Network and Meridian Health) placed Stanton, 65, at the helm of the new medical school they're in the process of founding. The first to open in the state in the last 50 years, the new school will be located on the site of the former campus of pharmaceutical giant Roche, which straddles the towns of Nutley and Clifton. And with Stanton as its dean, it is unlikely to

resemble any other medical school in the United States.

That would be fine with its joint founders, who chose Stanton in part for her wide experience in the realms of medicine, medical research, academia and academic leadership, but also for the idealism that's been a hallmark of her approach to medicine over the past 40 years.

Among a stack of C.V.s from eminent physicians, Stanton's resume was distinctive, says Seton Hall president A. Gabriel Esteban, for "her commitment to serve the underserved and the marginalized." In addition to having been chair of the Department of Pediatrics at West Virginia University, pediatrician-in-chief at Children's Hospital of Michigan, and pediatrics chair and vice dean for research at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit, she had worked with underserved populations in China, Africa, the Caribbean and Bangladesh.

Her commitment to service is also reflected in her choice of pediatrics as a specialty, which allowed her, she says, "to affect a trajectory; you aren't just treating a patient in now time, but

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BIG IDEAS
Dr. Bonita Stanton surveys the atrium of the new medical school being developed on the former Roche campus in Nutley and Clifton. The eminent physician and educator is founding dean of the nascent school, a partnership between Seton Hall University and Hackensack Meridian Health.



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you're impacting how the rest of that patient's life is going to go."

Much of Stanton's career has been driven by her desire to make an impact. As residents at Case Western University School of Medicine in Cleveland, Stanton and her then husband, also a physician, signed on to spend a rotation in Uganda. She was devastated when, six weeks before they were due to leave, the program's director phoned to report that the last American had just been expelled from the country. But, he told her, if she and her spouse were willing, they could spend their rotation in Bangladesh at the International Center for Diarrheal Research. She agreed immediately, then rushed off to locate Bangladesh on a map of Africa. "We did find the right continent eventually," she says drily.

Five years later, the center's director asked if the couple would be willing to return to Bangladesh for two years. The call came in at one o'clock in the afternoon; by four, they'd decided to sell their house in New Haven, Connecticut, uproot their two young daughters. They signed on for two years but ended up staying five.

Stanton headed up a volunteer team of women from the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city, who were charged with teaching their neighbors how to make an oral rehydration solution to treat diarrhea. At the time, the mortality rate for children under five in Bangladesh was more than 20 percent, and diarrhea was responsible for more than one third of those deaths. When the women on her team approached Stanton about teaching slum dwellers to prevent diarrhea, she was able to procure a grant from the United Nations to develop a program. "You can only imagine how empowering this was," she says, referring to herself — and the women she worked with.

Stanton was vice dean in charge of research at Wayne State School of Medicine when she was approached by the new medical school's search committee. She wasn't looking to move, but she was intrigued. Eventually, she realized "that the rewards of being able to start from scratch and build something that matches your dreams for the profession are just unparalleled."

As dean, she says, one of her primary jobs is to establish the school's vision, which she defines as helping to "develop a health

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care system that brings about equal health care outcomes for all people, regardless of their socioeconomic status." The school will do that, she explains, in several key ways. Notably, students will be assigned three to five families whom they will follow throughout their medical education—something no other school is doing. The point is to ground students in the messy reality of health care in the real world—where patients may not be able to afford or comply with prescribed medications and/or regimens—rather than in the abstract of a textbook or a classroom.

"We have to become a medical practice that recognizes that health and illness don't occur in the hospital or the doctor's office," says Stanton, "but in the community." To help ease the burden of debt that many newly minted MDs carry, the school will offer a three-year option as well as the typical four-year program. (Stanton notes that in many medical schools, the fourth year consists largely of an audition for an internship or residency.)

In addition, the school will emphasize an interdisciplinary, team approach to medical care, reflecting a growing trend in health care delivery. The building (actually two connected buildings, officially known as 123 and 123A) on the former Roche campus will eventually include not just the medical school, but also a clinical research center and Seton Hall's existing School of Nursing and College of Health and Medical Sciences, which trains occupational and physical therapists, physician assistants, and other health professionals. In five years, Stanton expects that the school will have brought more than 1,000 students and staff to the new campus, which was chosen for its proximity to Seton Hall, Hackensack University Medical Center and New York City (about a 13-mile drive).

That's good news for the towns of Clifton and Nutley, which for years have depended on Roche as a significant contributor to their tax bases. It's fair to say that when Roche announced in 2012 that it would be moving out of the 116-acre campus, residents and town administrators suffered something of a collective panic attack. In a state still feeling the effects of the 2008 recession, no one knew how long it would take to find a tenant, and many feared that the sprawling space would become home to yet another of the shopping centers that have created traffic nightmares in the area.

The new medical school, Seton Hall–Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine, will only take up 16 acres of the campus, and because it's a nonprofit entity, it won't be paying property taxes. But under the state's PILOT program (which stands for Payment in Lieu of Taxes), the school will be paying Nutley about \$500,000 and Clifton \$759,000 per year, and more if it expands on the property.

A major medical school, says Clifton mayor James Anzaldi, will serve as "a catalyst to attract other, similar tenants—maybe research, maybe other corporate headquarters—to the site." Prism Capital Partners, the real estate developer that bought the campus earlier this year, plans to include retail and residential space in the project. All of that will create new ratables for both municipalities. But more than that, notes Nutley mayor Joseph Scarpelli, the school "will be a boost to the local economy, with new customers for existing businesses and jobs for local residents."

It's also likely to benefit the state, which is expected to experience a shortage of close to 3,000 physicians by 2020. While it's unlikely that all of the school's graduates will stay in the Garden State, Esteban cites studies showing that more than half the doctors who do their residencies in a state tend to remain. And, he points out, "the partnership with the Hackensack Meridian network...is going to allow our would-be physicians to have clinical placements and residencies throughout New Jersey."

Most of those benefits will start to accrue in 2018, when the school is expected to open with an incoming class of about 50 students (ultimately to be capped at 125 per class year). That puts Stanton in the center of a maelstrom. Running a medical school is a major enterprise. Designing one from the ground up is a little like building a new world out of air. Having a building helps, though that building and its surroundings will undergo extensive renovations. And then the building has to be filled, not just with students, but with administrators and professors, who will require a meticulously designed curriculum.

Stanton heads a team of 180 medical and academic professionals populating 11 committees, who are striving to put the pieces in place that will allow the school to receive accreditation from the Liaison Committee

for Medical Education, the accrediting body for all allopathic (conventional/MD) medical schools in the United States and Canada. That entails, among other things, completing a 119-page questionnaire that functions as a kind of blueprint for establishing a new medical school. The finished application could exceed 1,000 pages.

"It's a huge enterprise," says Robert C. Garrett, co-CEO of Hackensack Meridian Health, noting that Stanton was chosen as much for her leadership and team-building abilities as her altruistic approach to medicine. "She defies that old adage of the doctor being the captain of the ship—she really believes in collaboration," he says.

Financing the school is also a collaborative process. The state is helping, with a \$10 million grant and \$16.9 million in tax credits for the potential jobs the school will create. Additional funding has come from the philanthropic community; Seton Hall and Hackensack Meridian will furnish the rest. According to Dan Kalmanson, Seton Hall's associate vice president for public relations and marketing, there are too many variables at this point to estimate the cost of getting the school up and running, but "it will be significant."

It's an expensive undertaking, but its founders expect it to yield substantial benefits. Seton Hall operated its own medical school from 1956 to 1965, when financial pressures forced the sale of the school to the state; it eventually became part of what is now the Rutgers School of Biomedical and Health Sciences. The new med school represents an opportunity for Seton Hall to join the ranks of the country's top universities, most of which operate both law and medical schools. For Hackensack, partnership in a medical school offers similar prestige and the chance to train the next generation of physicians.

For Stanton, the new school represents the opportunity of a lifetime—though she's quick to mention that she knows of several people who have actually served as founding deans at not one, but two new medical schools. One, however, seems to be Stanton's magic number. "I'm someone who likes to put down roots," she says. "So having planted this tree, I'd like to stick around and watch it grow." Given the school's potential to effect change in the community and the state, she's likely to have lots of company. 