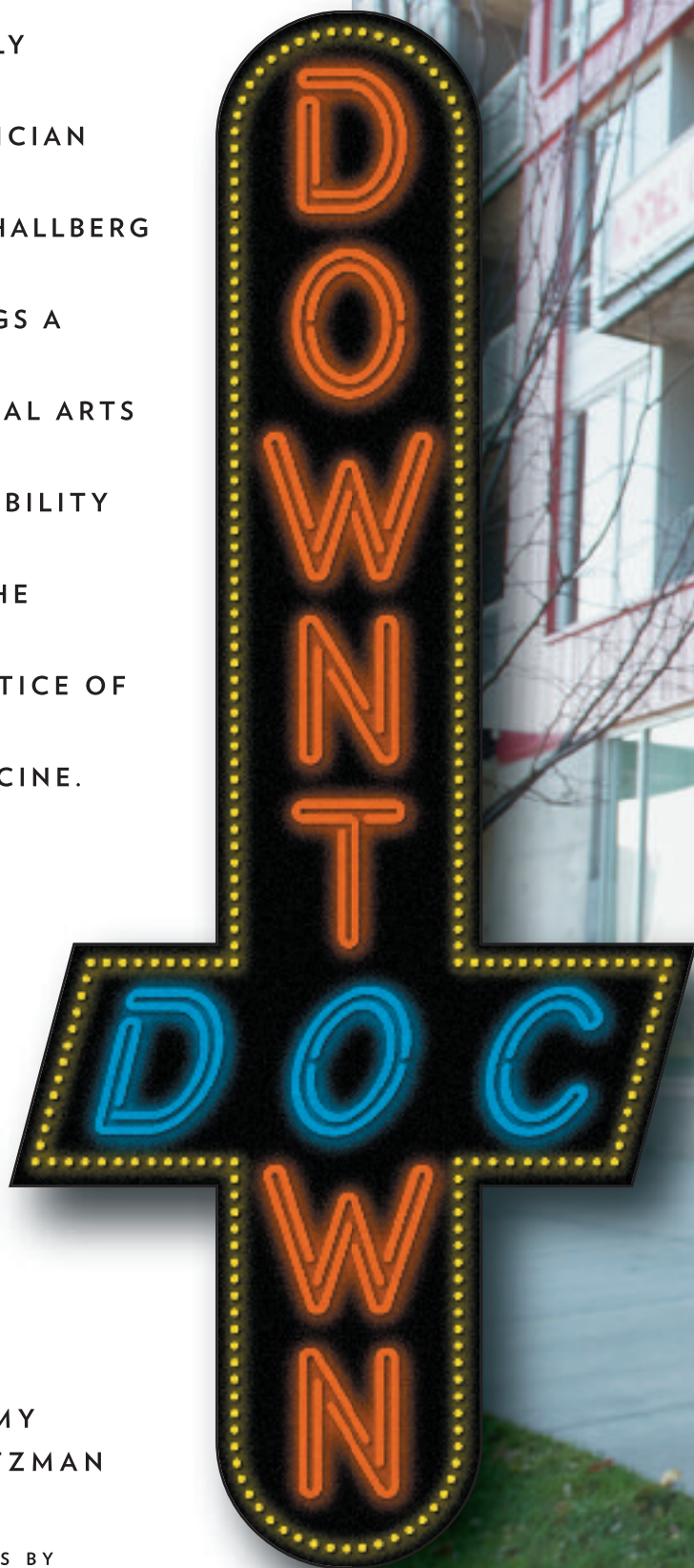


FAMILY  
PHYSICIAN  
JON HALLBERG  
BRINGS A  
LIBERAL ARTS  
SENSIBILITY  
TO THE  
PRACTICE OF  
MEDICINE.

BY AMY  
GOETZMAN

PHOTOS BY  
TOM ROSTER





We're talking about changing the way we pay for health care. But what about changing the way we experience medicine? Consider this: The mind and the body are intrinsically connected. In that case, maybe a doctor's appointment should be less like going to the auto repair shop and more like attending a play or a concert. Ideally, you'd come away feeling better, but also refreshed, enlightened, maybe even inspired. It sounds a little idealistic, but Jon Hallberg '88 is intent on proving that art is part of the cure for what ails us.

As medical director at the University of Minnesota Physicians Mill City Clinic in downtown Minneapolis's Mill District, Hallberg is transforming his patients' experience by surrounding them with art, music, and good design. It's evident the minute you step into the waiting room: A music student plays classical music in the center of a simple but graciously appointed seating area. Thoughtful reading material like *Smithsonian* and *Audubon* sits on coffee tables. The Nina Bliese gallery arranges quarterly exhibits on an expansive white wall. The current show: A stunning series of oversized landscape photos, a few small sculptures, and a funky Fortunyluke wire pendant dangling from the ceiling. It's so pleasing a space that when the clinic opened in late 2008, an actor from the Guthrie Theater, which is just across the street, began using it as a rehearsal area.

"People tell me the lobby is so calming and beautiful that they almost don't feel sick when they sit there," Hallberg says. "In helping to create this clinic, it came to me that design is one way to make people's lives better. Good design can actually create a better experience and, I believe, lead to better health."

Make no mistake: Hallberg is firmly grounded in traditional Western medicine. He's not going to prescribe herbs, wave crystals, or dissuade parents from vaccinating their



The waiting room of Hallberg's clinic is an inviting space that showcases local art.

children (although if that's what makes *you* feel better, he's respectfully interested in hearing about it). But as a primary care physician, he considers the whole patient — body and soul — and he has a keen sense that the arts play an immeasurable role in our well-being. They certainly do in his own life.

"The arts are my sustenance. Not a week goes by — and really, hardly a day — that I'm not reading a book, watching a movie, attending a concert, seeing a play, singing," he says. He chose to practice family medicine in part because he knew the clinic schedule would give him time for the arts. The catch-all nature of family medicine also meshes well with Hallberg's wide-ranging curiosity. "I loved the idea of 'generalism.' I'm a huge advocate of a liberal arts education and this specialty is, in my mind, the closest thing to a liberal arts specialty."

Hallberg moves through the clinic in a tweedy jacket and wire glasses, looking more like a professor than a doctor, and, in fact, he has taught classes at St. Olaf and at the University of Minnesota Medical School. He's also a talented musician and writer. But when he came to St. Olaf in 1984, he knew without a doubt that he was headed for medical school.

## BAND AND BANDAGES

AS A CHILD, “when all the kids played Army, I was always the medic. I’d use my dad’s old Ace wrap and my rucksack. I had a friend paint a helmet of mine with a red cross. It was in my blood,” he says. Born in New Ulm, Minnesota, Hallberg lived in Brussels, Belgium, from second to fourth grade when 3M transferred his father overseas. Hallberg loved it. The family moved back to Minnesota, resettling in New Brighton. In tenth grade, an Irondale High School guidance counselor suggested he look at St. Olaf College. “I was interested in medicine, and he thought it would be a great choice for me. He was right.”

But when he arrived on campus as a first-year student, it seemed to him that everyone was pre-med and diving deep into left-brain coursework. It rattled Hallberg, who’d thrown pottery, played the saxophone, and built a home darkroom.

So he reconsidered his vocation. “I thought about different medical-related careers and majored in chemistry, but really I feel like I majored in the liberal arts. I studied religion, English, economics, political science, music, French,” he says. “I was intellectually challenged and supported in broad ways by so many of my professors. A few really stand out: Vern Failletaz in religion, Henry Kermott in biology, Wes Pearson in chemistry who also was my adviser, English professors Dave Wee, Verlyn Klinkenborg, John Day, and Kevin Crossley-Holland, and my band director, the legendary Miles (‘Mity’) Johnson.”

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I HAD A FRIEND PAINT A HELMET OF MINE WITH A RED CROSS.”

Hallberg auditioned for the St. Olaf Band on his arrival and was one of two saxophone players chosen by Johnson. “I auditioned almost as a lark, and it was one of those fate things — it changed my life. I got to play with an incredibly high-caliber music organization and travel all over the country and to Norway for three weeks, playing for amazing audiences in amazing [concert] halls,” he says. “Some of my very best friends to this day were all in the band.”

On Christmas break during his freshman year, Hallberg saw the film *Amadeus*. “I was pretty blown away. Suddenly this connection was made in my head that it wasn’t just dead white guys making this old classical music. Mozart was this mischievous, crazy, unbelievably talented living, breathing person. My interest in music blossomed.”

Then his grandfather died. “There was something about that, seeing him in the hospital, seeing the physicians who cared for him, the kindness they showed him,” he says. “I considered other things related to medicine, but nothing

clicked like the idea of being able to actually lay hands on someone who was sick and help them.”

He recommitted to pre-med, but band remained an essential part of his life. In his junior year, a pretty sophomore named Diane Bruck kept crossing his path. She studied in the same places he did, was a fellow student help-line volunteer, and played flute in the St. Olaf Band. “He sent me a flower. There was this tradition where you could buy a flower on Friday to put in somebody’s post office box as a romantic gesture, so he sent me one anonymously. I didn’t even know who he was,” she says, laughing. Four years later, when Hallberg was in medical school at the University of Minnesota, they married.

“Part of the reason Jon is such a good physician and people feel so comfortable around him is that he naturally does something that Mity taught us: Ask people where they are from, make them feel comfortable, and engage them,” says Diane, who is a music director at Minnehaha Academy and plays in the Minnesota Symphonic Winds, a Twin Cities concert band that includes many St. Olaf alumni.

It’s a patient manner rarely seen in today’s rushed, impersonal medical environments. Hallberg is warm, inquisitive, and downright chatty, and he has a good memory for the things that make his patients tick, not just what makes them sick. “Patients feel his genuine care for them and feel as if he does everything he can to help them,” says Cecilia House, an RN who has worked with Hallberg for eight years. “Many

patients comment that they have never had a doctor like him before; some say they are so grateful to have found him.”

His bedside manner is so engaging, in fact, that early in his career, he got in trouble — for spending too much time with his patients. An early employer cut Hallberg’s salary a harsh 15 percent to encourage him to rethink his “productivity.” (And note here that family medicine is one of medicine’s most poorly paid specialties.) “In many clinics, we’re expected to see thirty or forty patients a day, and productivity is measured by that pace. I’m not comfortable practicing that kind of medicine,” he says. Today, as a University of Minnesota physician, he runs a brisk but sane clinic schedule and clearly loves his work.

Listeners of Minnesota Public Radio can hear it in Hallberg’s voice: For six years, he’s been the medical analyst for one of its top programs, *All Things Considered*. On the air, he calmly demystifies the scariest topics: Swine flu, autism, cancer, Alzheimer’s. But on other days, he brings



TOP: Guthrie actors Peter Michael Goetz (center), Mark Nelson, and Angie Timberman joined Hallberg and a 100-member audience for a new project called Hippocrates Cafe, an event that explored the theme of "influenza" through music and a series of dramatic readings. ABOVE: Diane '89 and Jon Hallberg chat with local opera legend Vern Sutton before the Hippocrates Cafe performance. LEFT: Hallberg is the regular medical analyst for Minnesota Public Radio, where he speaks on a specific health topic most weeks.

music, film, and poetry into his on-air discussion, talking a bit faster and reminding listeners with genuine excitement that a healthy life includes art.

“Jon is a public radio listener and fan himself,” says regional *All Things Considered* host Tom Crann. “He knows that he is talking to a varied, general audience, and not only to other medical academics and professionals. He knows how to relate to the audience and, at the same time, not dumb things down. He talks to an intelligent, curious listener who is not necessarily a clinician.”

As the debate about health care has heated up on a national level, Hallberg sees his MPR spots as one way he can contribute to the conversation. He says he sees a need for rational, thoughtful health care information to counter the hype and hysteria that surrounds medical topics, and he'd like to see more medical students pursue family medicine, which is becoming a depleted area as students opt for higher-paying jobs. “I hope that the work I do helps shed a positive light on family medicine and primary care. If someone out there heard me and said, ‘Oh, that sounds pretty cool. Maybe I'd like to be a family physician,’ that would make me very happy,” he says.

“I’VE NEVER SEEN SO MUCH DISCUSSION ABOUT HEALTH CARE. IT’S VERY HEARTENING, VERY EXCITING, AND AS A PHYSICIAN IN THE MIDST OF ALL THIS, I THINK, ‘WHAT’S MY ROLE HERE?’”

#### GRAND SLAM

THIS ISN'T THE FIRST TIME Hallberg has stepped into a media role to communicate these messages. In 2000, when he was working at a Fairview clinic in downtown Minneapolis, he penned a regular column for the *Skyway News* (now *Downtown Journal*) called “Downtown Doc.”

“The editor, Scott Briggs, was a St. Olaf classmate of mine, and he asked if I'd be willing to give it a try. I said, ‘Sure, looks like fun.’ It was a serendipitous moment. I'd been in practice for five years and I was itching to do something a little bit beyond the walls of the clinic,” he says. “I really enjoyed it, and it turned out that 2000 was a really big year for me; my daughter was born, my grandmother passed away, my clinic closed, my colleague retired, and I had tons of food for thought.”

Obesity, health care costs, end-of-life issues, and the flu were on patients' minds then, as now, and the Downtown Doc often wrote about these issues through his own family's perspective. The idea of a doctor that could be personal, yet smart, professional, and insightful appealed to people, and the column brought in new patients, as his MPR presence does now. Although his patients come from all walks of life,

a small subset of his practice is devoted to high profile people in the entertainment world, and this work has earned him a reputation as something of a celebrity doctor, although he's not having any of that.

“People say I'm a ‘Doctor to the Stars’ — that really bothers me, I never talk about that. I hate ... when I'm introduced that way,” he says. “Okay, so who are celebrity doctors? Doctor Oz, Oprah's doctor? Sanjay Gupta? I'm just a family physician with a really great platform to talk about health care.”

So, to set the record straight, here's the part about the celebrities: Hallberg is the company physician for the Guthrie Theater and also attends players from the Minnesota Orchestra and the Minnesota Opera, among others. If a performer comes down with laryngitis or joint pain or falls off the stage, he's on call for them. It's not an everyday part of his practice, but as a musician himself, he is uniquely able to understand the specifics of arts medicine. He also knows a thing or two about sports medicine.

One day, as a third-year family medicine resident doing a rotation in the Medical Arts Building, Hallberg met a patient who also happened to be a physician and worked with the

Minnesota Twins baseball team. “Within two or three minutes of meeting this guy, he mentions that he's retiring and asked me if I'd be interested in taking over the job. It took about one microsecond for me to decide that I'd love to do it,” he says.

If doctoring is in Hallberg's blood, then this side gig seems to have been lined up in the stars. “I was born in October 1965, the month the Twins were in the World Series for the first time. In 1987, the second time they were in the World Series, I was a senior in college. And in 1991, their third time, I was a fourth-year medical student. So my life has been bookmarked in very significant ways by the Twins,” he says. “I love baseball, and my childhood heroes were Harmon Killebrew, Tony Oliva, Rod Carew. And now I've actually met these guys over the years, so it's like a boyhood dream come true.”

Thirteen years later, he's still with the Minnesota Twins, dealing less with the drama of game injuries than with the quiet problems that don't make the papers: “I work with the employee assistance program, managing things like anxiety, depression, marital issues, positive drug tests, and not just with

DOWNTOWN DOC [CONTINUED ON PAGE 48]



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the players, but with everyone, the front office, the coaching staff, all players.”

There’s something wholesome about Hallberg, the baseball fan and band geek, who says he’s not a workaholic; he’s just following his passions, which just happen to be connected to his work. “Honestly, I think I am balanced,” he says, claiming that if he were his own doctor, he’d approve of his schedule. “I’m a huge believer in activity. I cut the grass, walk our dog, walk with

my wife, go sledding and skating in the winter, and when I walk, I walk fast.”

He also thinks fast and thinks big. He recently joined the Colleagues Advisory Board for the Weisman Art Museum and serves on the Target Studio for Creative Collaboration committee.

“This is a new venture that brings together minds from vastly different disciplines to see what kind of alchemy can occur,” he says. “I have all these crazy ideas, new ways to bring arts into the clinic and into the way we deliver medicine. We’re at a very interesting juncture

in medical history. We’re revolutionizing how we pay for it with health care reform, how we document it with records reform, and how we deliver it with new delivery models. I think the arts could play an incredibly powerful role in this.”

This fall Hallberg inaugurated the Hippocrates Cafe, a quarterly salon in which actors and musicians explore medicine and the human condition. Each event has a theme (such as influenza) that is illuminated through poetry, fiction, non-fiction, historical perspective, pop culture, humor, and music. Hallberg sees this as a tonic to the hype and hysteria that surrounds so much of the coverage of health care today.

“I’M A HUGE ADVOCATE OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION, AND FAMILY PRACTICE IS, IN MY MIND, THE CLOSEST THING TO A LIBERAL ARTS SPECIALTY.”

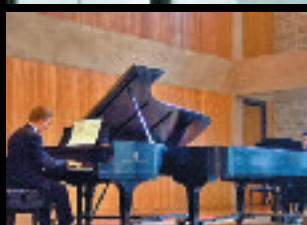
In 2005, Hallberg cared for victims of Hurricane Katrina as part of the University of Minnesota’s Medical Reserve Corps, a service experience that impressed on him the extent to which the system is broken. Now he’s looking for ways to be a part of the fix.

“With the Obama push to reform the system, I’ve never seen so much discussion about health care. It’s very heartening, very exciting, and as a physician in the midst of all this, I think, ‘what’s my role here?’ I can help educate the public so people can be better consumers, to make better decisions, to take better care of themselves. That all becomes part of this process,” he says. “Education is a first-tier approach, and if you rise higher up the ladder, you get to more complicated policy issues. That’s a top-tier area, and that’s not where I can work. But I can make a difference down below. It’s my duty.”

And at the Mill City Clinic, it’s already happening. “Perhaps the arts can’t heal the body,” says Hallberg. “But on so many other levels, I’m certain they do us a world of good.” 🐼

AMY GOETZMAN lives in Minneapolis where she writes about culture and the arts.

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