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Unsung Hero Donald Manelli, Care Harbor's President and Founder



Editors Note: Donald Manelli is the President and Founder of Care Harbor, an organization producing free clinic events that provide medical, dental and vision services to thousands of uninsured and underinsured in our community. Mr. Manelli was selected as the California Community Foundation's 2013 Unsung Hero of Los Angeles because of the work he has done to inspire thousands of health professionals to donate their time to serve those in need of medical care through this nonprofit organization. We asked Mr. Manelli to share with us his personal story about tackling the challenges of health care services and what the future holds for Care Harbor. The 2013 Care Harbor event is October 31-November 3 at the L.A. Sports Arena.

By Donald Manelli

I grew up in the Midwest, in a town so small that the main street had only one side. It was a human scaled world that gave you a sense of individual worth and potential. My father was a doctor and my mother was a nurse, so I also grew up in a medical household. Before [Care Harbor](#), my career was in film production and organizing major corporate events and I gained experience in managing logistics on a large scale. All of

these paths eventually came together at **Care Harbor** and I think that is why this work is so personally fulfilling.

The idea of free clinic events isn't new. Many organizations conduct health fairs and clinics in one form or another and after volunteering for a few, I felt that more could be done.

What is unique about **Care Harbor** is our simple vision: to transform these clinics from episodic, temporary care to sustainable care, to make a lasting impact on the lives of the people we see and the community at large. We accomplish this with innovative systems to greatly expand best practice care on site, and most importantly, to add prevention and follow-up care components to the free clinic model. We are temporary clinics, but we provide more than temporary care. At our last clinic, we saw 3,758 patients and more than 1,000 were connected to medical homes for continuing care – including free surgeries; patients who needed follow-up received appointments before they left the building. Preventive care, the most effective and economical form of health care, was provided to all patients, and included support for smoking cessation, nutrition, pre-natal consultation and stress management.



Care Harbor clinics are real time philanthropy. You see the results happen. Lives are changed right before your eyes and everyone who participates, from doctors, dentists, optometrists and more, say these events are life changing experiences.

There are so many dramatic stories that stand out. I recall a woman with advanced breast cancer now doing well; a man with a partially detached retina whose sight was saved with surgery the same day, a veteran whose pacemaker was about to fail and was replaced. There are thousands of patient stories from every clinic we conduct.

Yet, the story that stays with me most is that of an elderly gentleman, a retired trumpet player, widowed and living alone. His one joy was playing his trumpet with several other retired musicians, but dental problems prevented him from playing because of the pain. The dental work was done at the clinic and he came back the next day to show me an old faded photo of himself as a young man in a band. He wanted to know my favorite song so that could be the first one he played.

The impact of **Care Harbor** on me and all of the volunteers is profoundly moving and motivating. There is no way we can stop doing it. That is why we get so many repeat volunteers. The impact on the community at large is also major and not often realized.

Diagnosing diseases before they progress to a critical and costly phase reduces the economic burden on a community's safety net programs. Fixing dental or vision problems makes people more employable and productive. Providing care for treatable diseases means patients aren't using the ER as their family doctor. The costs of unreimbursed ER visits by uninsured patients is estimated to add \$1,000 a year to an insured family's premiums.

For me, the direct emotional connection to the work is what matters most. The rewards are immediate – up close and personal. There are thousands of unsung heroes at **Care Harbor** – not only the 3,000 to 4,000 volunteers who serve during the course of an event – but the patients as well. They come from all walks of life, all life situations, but one quality that unites them all in my mind is their courage. They endure so much and with few exceptions, deal with their challenges with grace and dignity. It is a privilege not only to serve them but also to get to know them.



Starting **Care Harbor** and seeing it come to this moment in time has been both a journey and an adventure. I believe that everyone on our team has that same feeling of fulfillment and personal empowerment.

We are breaking new ground at **Care Harbor** and will continue to do so. We have developed the systems and resources to make these events replicable in other communities. What is so cool about

this journey is that it never ends. We can always innovate more, do more, find new ways to provide quality, sustainable care to those most in need. And we will.

Tags: [california community foundation](#), [Care Harbor](#), [CCF unsung hero](#), [Donald Manelli](#), [los angeles](#), [preventive care](#), [specialist](#), [stress management](#), [Unsung Hero](#), [volunteer](#)

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