



Closing the Gap: How a Church-Hospital Intervention on Chicago's West Side is Aiming to Reduce Hypertension

By Josh Neufeld (<http://JoshComix.com>), writer/artist of The New York Times bestseller "A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge," and the Xeric Award-winning graphic travelogue "A Few Perfect Hours (and Other Stories from Southeast Asia & Central Europe), contributing illustrator for The Journalist's Resource (<https://journalistsresource.org>)

CLOSING THE GAP

How a church-hospital intervention on Chicago's West Side is aiming to reduce hypertension

BY Josh Neufeld

IN CHICAGO, THERE'S A DISTRESSING **NINE-YEAR GAP** IN AVERAGE **LIFE-EXPECTANCY** BETWEEN **AFRICAN AMERICANS** AND THE REST OF THE CITY'S POPULATION.

NON-AFRICAN AMERICANS

80.6 YEARS

AFRICAN AMERICANS

71.4 YEARS

ONE OF THE MAIN CAUSES OF LOWER LIFE EXPECTANCY IS **CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE**, WHICH IS OFTEN EXACERBATED BY HYPERTENSION -- **HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE**.

CHICAGO'S AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION HAS A **SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER PREVALENCE OF UNCONTROLLED HYPERTENSION** THAN MOST OTHER GROUPS.

THE **ALIVE FAITH NETWORK** (FORMERLY THE ALIVE CHURCH NETWORK) IS WORKING TO **CLOSE** THAT LIFE-EXPECTANCY GAP.

ALIVE
FAITH NETWORK

FOUNDED IN 2011, **AFN** IS A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN **RUSH UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER** AND A COALITION OF CHICAGO-AREA **CHURCHES**.

AFN'S CO-FOUNDERS:

THE IDEA IS TO REALLY **INTEGRATE HEALTH** INTO THE CULTURE OF THE CHURCH.



ELIZABETH B. "BETH" LYNCH,
PROF. OF PREVENTIVE
MEDICINE, RUSH U. MED. CTR.

IN TERMS OF RECRUITING CHURCHES, WE START WITH THE **PASTOR**. WE TALK TO THEM ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR PROJECT OR STUDY, IF IT'S SOMETHING THEY THINK THEIR CONGREGATION SHOULD BE EXPOSED TO OR ENGAGED IN.



LaDAWNE JENKINS,
PROGRAM MANAGER, INSTITUTE
FOR TRANSLATIONAL MEDICINE

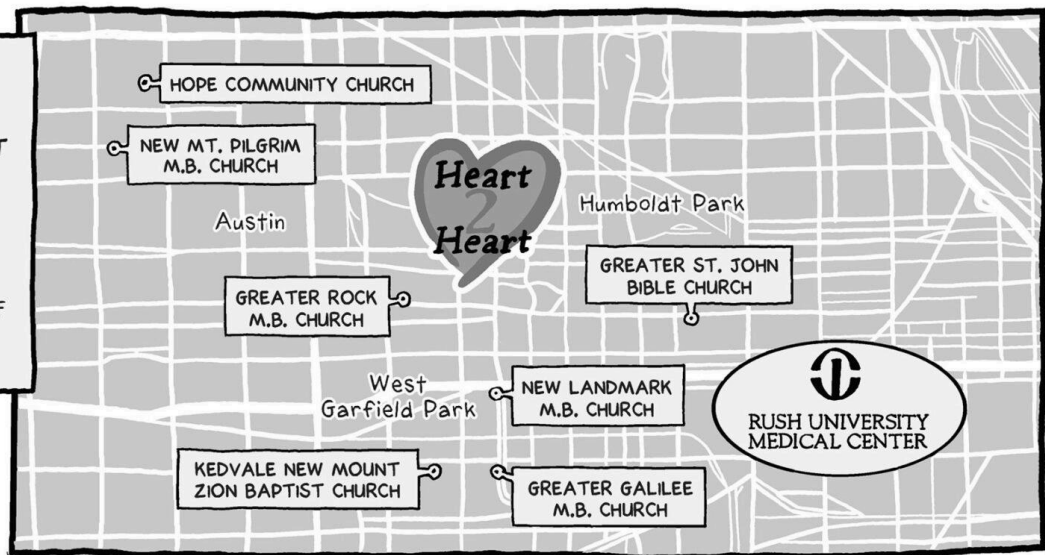
RUSH ASKED IF I WANTED TO BE A PART OF THE WORK AS WELL. AND I QUICKLY **AGREED**.

CHUCKLE AND THEY HAVEN'T LET ME GO YET.



STEVE EPTING SR., PASTOR,
HOPE COMMUNITY CHURCH

A RECENT INTERVENTION BY THE GROUP -- DUBBED **HEART 2 HEART** -- WAS AIMED AT REDUCING HYPERTENSION AMONG THE CONGREGANTS OF SEVERAL WEST SIDE CHURCHES.



FOR THE HEART 2 HEART STUDY, THE GROUP FOCUSED ON IMPROVING DIET AND MEDICATION ADHERENCE.

DASH Diet

- Cut down on sodium
- Eat more veggies!
- Avoid sugary drinks
- Eat more whole grains

BUT CRUCIAL TO THE PROJECT OVERALL WERE COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS (CHWs)--

--CHURCH MEMBERS WHO WERE HIRED AND TRAINED TO WORK WITH THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS.

THAT CHURCH-HOSPITAL RELATIONSHIP WAS KEY.

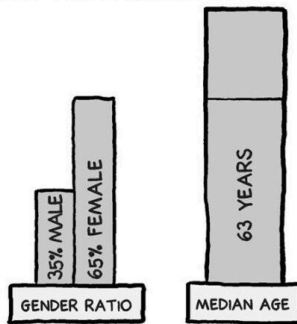
TERESA BERUMEN, LEAD COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER, RUSH U. SYSTEM FOR HEALTH



CHWs CAN RELATE TO THAT COMMUNITY IN A MUCH EASIER WAY THAN [MEDICAL] PROVIDERS OR ACADEMIA CAN -- BECAUSE THEY [ARE] FAMILIAR FACES.

ONE THING I HAVE LEARNED IS THAT THEY DON'T TRUST JUST ANYONE TO COME TO THEIR HOMES OR TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH.

ULTIMATELY, ABOUT **80** PARISHIONERS WERE CHOSEN FOR THE INTERVENTION.



PARTICIPANTS WERE REQUIRED TO HAVE UNCONTROLLED -- **VERY HIGH** -- BLOOD PRESSURE AND BE WILLING TO VISIT WITH A **CHW** TWICE A MONTH FOR SIX MONTHS.

THE **CHWs** WOULD CHECK THEIR **BLOOD PRESSURE**, GO OVER THEIR **DIETS** AND STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF TAKING THEIR **PRESCRIBED MEDICATIONS**.



YOU HAD TO ALSO **EDUCATE** THEM ON HOW MUCH **SALT** INTAKE AND **SUGAR** INTAKE THEY SHOULD HAVE DAILY.



ANTHONY HIXSON,
COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER
(NEW LANDMARK M.B. CHURCH)

"I'LL TELL THEM SOMETHING SIMPLE AS **READING THE LABEL** ON THE BACK OF A CAN."

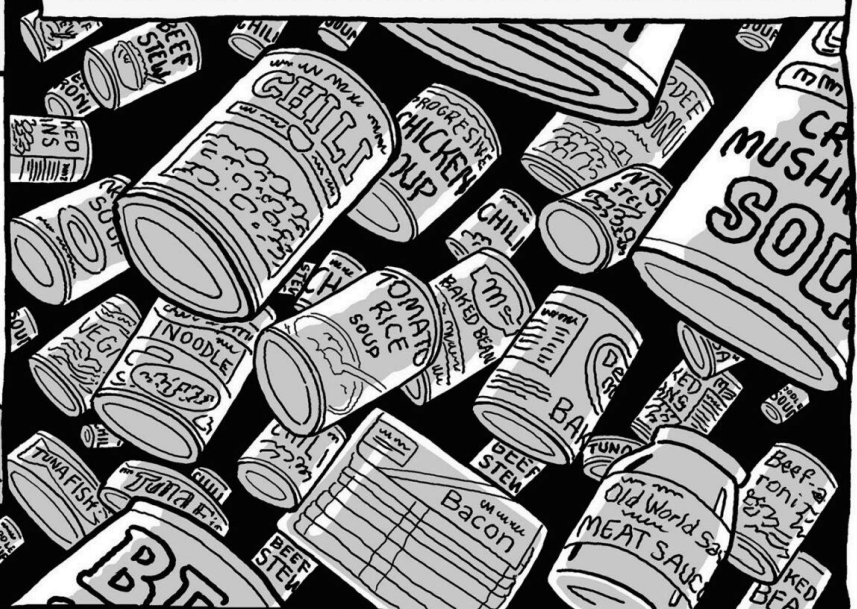


"BECAUSE NOW YOU START REALIZING HOW MUCH **SODIUM**, HOW MUCH **SUGAR**, THEY HAVE IN THAT CAN OF FOOD."

OK, THAT'S WAY TOO MUCH.



"SO A LOT OF PEOPLE WENT HOME AND START **THROWING CANNED GOODS AWAY** BECAUSE IT HAS TOO MUCH SODIUM IN IT."



ANTHONY WAS OUR **STAR** COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER. HE PROBABLY HAD THE BEST **ENGAGEMENT** AND THE MOST **EFFECTIVE WORK** WITH HIS PARTICIPANTS.

YEAH, HE HAD THE **BIGGEST BLOOD PRESSURE REDUCTION**. HE MADE IT VERY CLEAR HOW MUCH HE GENUINELY CARED ABOUT PEOPLE.



"HE DROVE **LONG DISTANCES** TO MEET HIS PARTICIPANTS -- AT THE TIME THAT **THEY** WERE AVAILABLE."



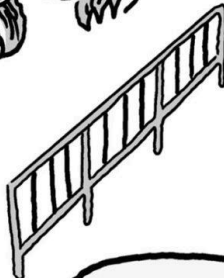
"HE REALLY WENT THE **EXTRA MILE**."

THE CHWs ALSO FOUND WAYS TO **REDUCE EVERYDAY STRESS**, WHICH CAN AFFECT BLOOD PRESSURE.

HE ACTUALLY **FIXED PEOPLE'S TOILETS!**

HE **FIXED CHURCH THINGS** THAT WERE FALLING APART.

ONE TIME [HE] **FIXED THE RAILING** ON THE STAIRS GOING INTO ONE OF THE CHURCHES BECAUSE HE NOTICED IT WAS FALLING OFF.



I ALSO DO **CARPENTRY** AND STUFF.

ONE GUY, HE [WAS] HAVING TROUBLE WITH THE **LOCK**, SO IT WASN'T REALLY MAJOR.

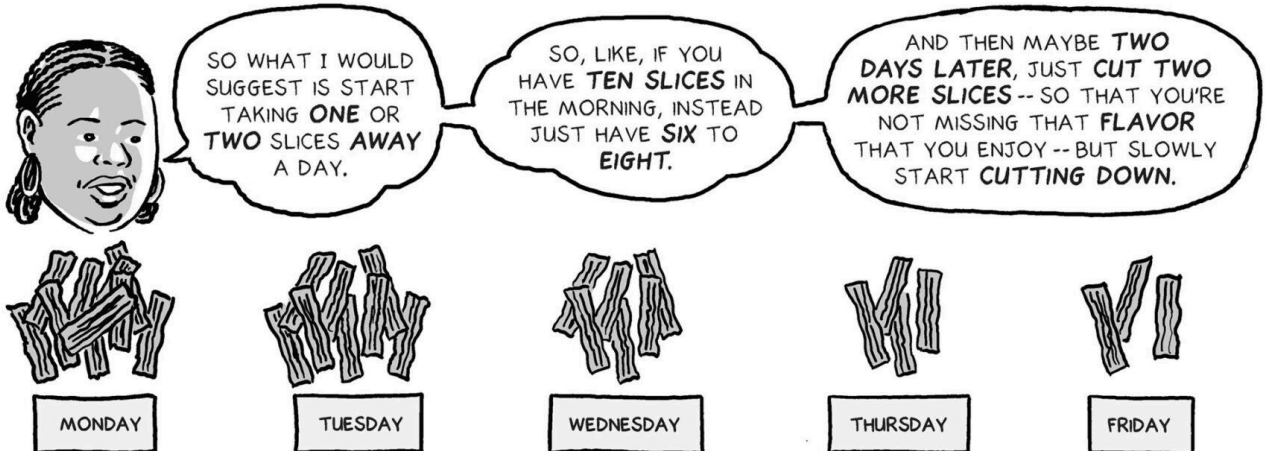
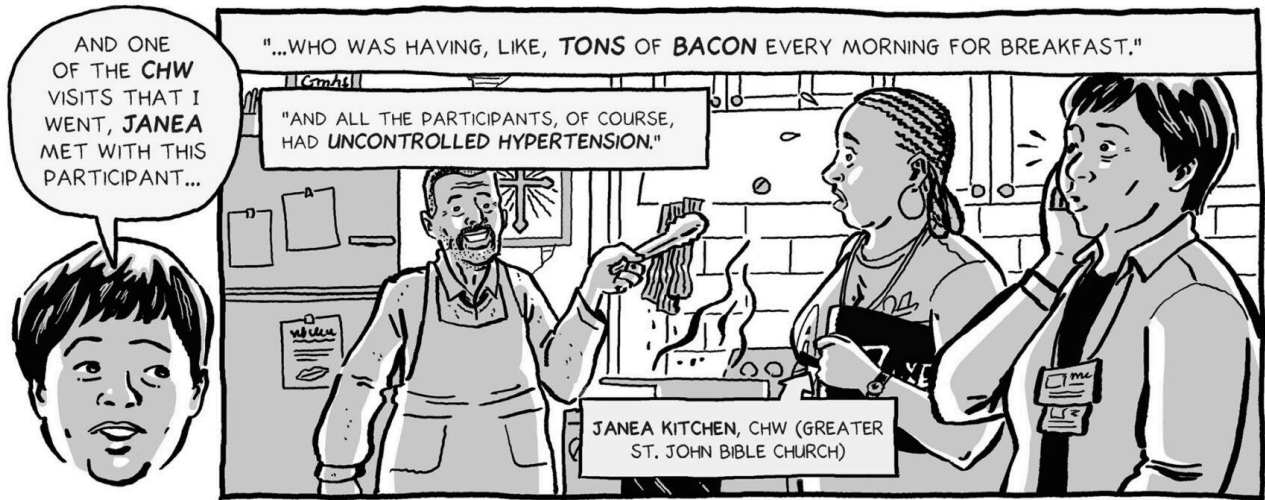
AND THEN, LIKE SHE SAID, ONE OLD LADY, SHE HAD A PROBLEM WITH HER **TOILET**.

I GOT THAT **FIXED**.

COMMUNITY WORK IS NOT **WORK** FOR PEOPLE -- IT STOPS BEING **WORK** AND IT'S JUST A **LIFESTYLE**.

PEOPLE **CALL** YOU, PEOPLE **SEE** YOU. YOU'RE IN THE **COMMUNITY** ANYWAY. THAT'S THE **PERSON** YOU ARE.





THE ALIVE FAITH NETWORK THINKS OF ITS WORK AS "FAITH-BASED" RATHER THAN "FAITH-PLACED."

IN THE FIELD OF **BEHAVIOR CHANGE** IN MEDICINE, WE HAVE ALL THESE **THEORIES** ABOUT HOW DO YOU GET PEOPLE TO **CHANGE**.

WHAT WE HAVE NOTICED IN BOTH THIS STUDY AND IN [ANOTHER] STUDY IS THAT IT'S **VERY HARD** TO GET PEOPLE TO DO THOSE THINGS.



"IT'S **HARD** TO TRAIN PEOPLE -- LIKE **CHURCH MEMBERS** AND SO ON -- TO DO THESE KINDS OF TECHNIQUES. IT DOESN'T COME **NATURALLY**."



"SO IN A LOT OF OUR INTERVENTIONS, THEY DON'T DO THEM USING THE '**TRADITIONAL METHODS**.'"



"[BUT] WE'RE PARTNERING WITH THE **CHURCH COMMUNITY**. THAT'S WHAT THEY **DO** -- THEY **SUPPORT** EACH OTHER AND PROMOTE WELLNESS AMONGST EACH OTHER."

"IT'S A **WELLNESS COMMUNITY**, RIGHT?"

"**FAITH-BASED INTERVENTION** IS YOU'RE REALLY **INTEGRATING FAITH** INTO THE INTERVENTION ITSELF."



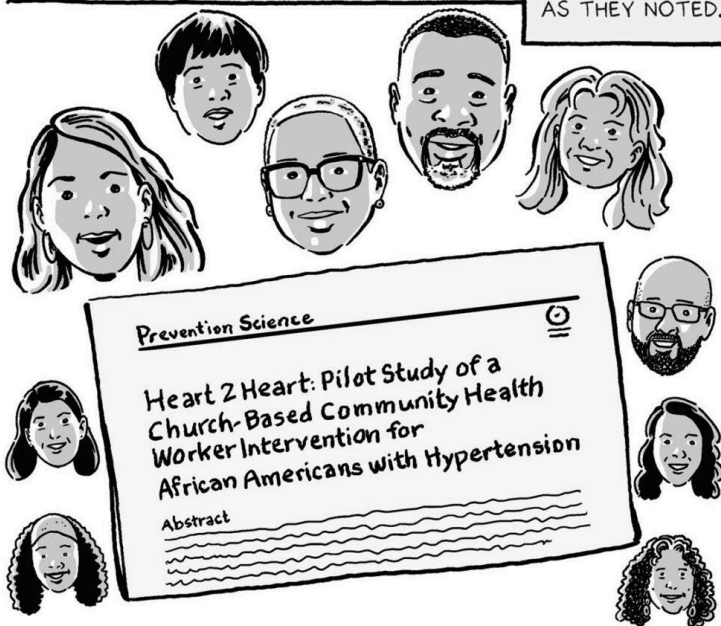
TAKING THE **CHURCH HOW IT IS NOW** AND THEN BRING **HEALTH** INTO IT -- WITHOUT BRINGING **ACADEMIA** AND "**PLOPPING**" IT IN.



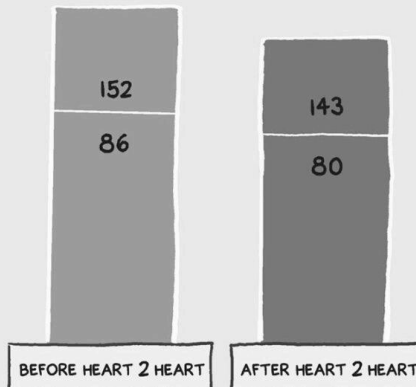
THE ALIVE FAITH NETWORK LEADERS AND THEIR RUSH COLLEAGUES PUBLISHED THEIR STUDY IN THE MEDICAL JOURNAL **PREVENTION SCIENCE**.

AS THEY NOTED...

"THE PROGRAM WAS EFFECTIVE IN ACHIEVING A **CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT REDUCTION** IN BLOOD PRESSURE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH UNCONTROLLED BLOOD PRESSURE."



MEAN BLOOD PRESSURE



AND NOW...

[RESEARCHERS] COME TO THE **ALIVE FAITH NETWORK** BECAUSE THEY NEED PEOPLE.

AND SO THAT'S A **REGULAR THING**.

WE'RE NOW AT, LIKE, **143 CHURCHES** ACROSS THE CHICAGOLAND AREA.



THE **BIG STUDY** THAT WE'RE DOING NOW IS A NEW VERSION OF THAT ORIGINAL ONE.

IT'S **CLASSES** THAT ARE TAUGHT TO THE WHOLE CHURCH, TO FOCUS ON **LIFESTYLE**.



"THERE'S A **BIBLE STUDY** THAT THE PASTOR GIVES IN THE CHURCH, AND IT FOCUSES ON **HEALTHY EATING** AND **MOTIVATION** AND THINGS LIKE THAT, USING **SCRIPTURE**."



"DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOUR BODIES ARE TEMPLES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. THEREFORE HONOR GOD WITH YOUR BODIES."

AND...

MORE CONVERSATIONS **INTERNALLY**, SO US PASTORS BEGIN TO TALK ABOUT HEALTH MORE.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE, DIABETES, **MENTAL HEALTH**.

ALL OF THOSE THINGS NOW ARE **COMFORTABLE** CONVERSATIONS THAT MAY NOT HAVE BEEN COMFORTABLE [BEFORE].



IF WE DON'T KNOW HOW PEOPLE **REALLY** THINK, THERE'S NO WAY TO **DO** ANYTHING ABOUT IT.



END.

Editor's note:

In "Closing the Gap: How a Church-Hospital Partnership is Reducing Hypertension on Chicago's West Side," Josh Neufeld uses the form of comics journalism (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_journalistsresource.org_media_documenting-2Dpandemic-2Dcomics-2Djournalism_&d=DwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=m7iaRYBdDWOMFRGSoylVpQwx-4B9bgpkWSUm_oohWCo&m=Nmn6E_TNlwq0qZtw45mgF-NDZOTcXH1wCzNEcXQe6_46fnT-TM_ia20nnpCwuWLy&s=QV_1s8tYVAot_Ro4pc3gHiyVKNUymsKbmjRjpOMIYpA&e=) to highlight a recent research article (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_link.springer.com_article_10.1007_s11121-2D023-2D01553-2Dx&d=DwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=m7iaRYBdDWOMFRGSoylVpQwx-4B9bgpkWSUm_oohWCo&m=Nmn6E_TNlwq0qZtw45mgF-NDZOTcXH1wCzNEcXQe6_46fnT-TM_ia20nnpCwuWLy&s=-Bhpbr1NMYgk2DeCVCldN5vpLmRixnKiAe5XcgwNYus&e=) published in the journal *Prevention Science*. The comic draws on the article itself along with additional sources, including Zoom interviews with Elizabeth B. Lynch (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_www.rushu.rush.edu_faculty_elizabeth-2Db-2Dlynch-2Dphd&d=DwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=m7iaRYBdDWOMFRGSoylVpQwx-4B9bgpkWSUm_oohWCo&m=Nmn6E_TNlwq0qZtw45mgF-NDZOTcXH1wCzNEcXQe6_46fnT-TM_ia20nnpCwuWLy&s=p_EE_r2t9YAPKteQCCwNeC5pAUR2m9aPOFr6c29ET5Q&e=), LaDawne Jenkins (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_www.linkedin.com_in_ladawne-2Djenkins-2Da517a9126_&d=DwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=m7iaRYBdDWOMFRGSoylVpQwx-4B9bgpkWSUm_oohWCo&m=Nmn6E_TNlwq0qZtw45mgF-NDZOTcXH1wCzNEcXQe6_46fnT-TM_ia20nnpCwuWLy&s=9MrsxK3WvoCi4BOF4J-JxIWdajUb-aw-b1Pq-ftjigo&e=), Steve Epting Sr. (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_onehopenation.org_our-2Dpastor_&d=DwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=m7iaRYBdDWOMFRGSoylVpQwx-4B9bgpkWSUm_oohWCo&m=Nmn6E_TNlwq0qZtw45mgF-NDZOTcXH1wCzNEcXQe6_46fnT-TM_ia20nnpCwuWLy&s=XqMmDrNVLR954Dek_DdXKYRnQfQAnZ3uBt0WN_rSSMw&e=), Teresa Berumen (<https://www.rush.edu/news/community-health-worker-highlight-meet-teresa>), and Anthony Hixson.

Those five people are characters in the comic, which describes an innovative community health worker intervention aimed at reducing blood pressure among the congregants of several area churches.

Neufeld uses subtle coloring techniques for journalistic clarity. The characters' speech balloon quotes that are shaded in light pink come directly and exactly from their interviews with Neufeld. The white speech balloons represent indirect quotes, such as when a primary source recalled what another person said during a community health visit. The text in yellow caption boxes represents Neufeld's own narrative.

This piece adds to the growing field of graphic medicine, which uses comics as a tool to tell true stories about health care experiences, as well as to distill and discuss complex medical topics.

Neufeld is the creator of several graphic medicine comics, including "Vaccinated at the Ball: A True Story about Trusted Messengers" (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_journalistsresource.org_home_vaccinated-2Dat-2Dthe-2Dball-2Da-2Dtrue-2Dstory-2Dabout-2Dtrusted-2Dmessengers_&d=DwMFaQ&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=m7iaRYBdDWOMFRGSoylVpQwx-4B9bgpkWSUm_oohWCo&m=Nmn6E_TNlwq0qZtw45mgF-NDZOTcXH1wCzNEcXQe6_46fnT-TM_ia20nnpCwuWLy&s=XqMmDrNVLR954Dek_DdXKYRnQfQAnZ3uBt0WN_rSSMw&e=).

[BnQgid1w6ozmhYpNvMHDo&e=](#)),” which won the 2023 GMIC Award for Excellence in Graphic Medicine, Short Form, from the Graphic Medicine International Collective.

Sources:

“[Heart 2 Heart: Pilot Study](#)” of a Church-Based Community Health Worker Intervention for African Americans with Hypertension (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11121-023-01553-x>),” Elizabeth B. Lynch, Christy Tangey, Todd Roppar, Laura Zimmerman, Joselyn Williams, LaDawne Jenkins, Steve M. Epting, Elizabeth Avery, Tamara Olinger, Teresa Berumen, Maggie Skoller, and Rebecca Wornhoff. Prevention Science, July 2023.

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