

# Not by Design

Former graphic artist Paula Wilson took roundabout path to become chief executive at Valley Community Healthcare in North Hollywood.

By **AMY STULICK** Staff Reporter

**P**aula Wilson is chief executive at Valley Community Healthcare, a North Hollywood nonprofit that provides clinical and patient services to low-income, medically underserved residents. As a child, Wilson lived for a time in Sherman Oaks but spent her formative years in Lake Tahoe, Nev. What started out as a graphic design gig – she designed the Valley Community Healthcare logo – turned into a professional passion to help others. Valley Community Healthcare has locations in North Hollywood and North Hills, as well as a school-based clinic in Granada Hills. Wilson met with the Business Journal at her offices to discuss the challenges of fundraising, the looming doctor shortage and how her graphic design background has influenced her management skills.

## PAULA WILSON

**Title:** Chief Executive

**Organization:** Valley Community Healthcare

**Born:** Berkeley

**Education:** Bachelor's at University of Puget Sound, California College of the Arts

**Most Influential People:** Jane Goodall, Kahilil Gibran, Maya Angelou

**Career Turning Point:** Watching my mother advance her career and lead an organization.

**Personal:** Daughter of a musician.

**Hobbies:** Ballroom dancing, hiking, learning to weave

**Question: What made you want to pursue a health care career?**

**Answer:** I came to this by a very roundabout way. I didn't grow up wanting to be in health care; it wasn't my dream. I was an artist, graphic designer, and I went to art school. I wanted to work in advertising and marketing.

For about 10 years, I ran a graphic design business. I started out as a volunteer here. They asked me to help design their logo on some of the materials they use for fundraising, some marketing materials. I had a real affinity for the organization.

**How did that affinity develop?**

There was a friend of mine that was a patient here with HIV, and he was the one that connected me. He contracted HIV when he didn't really know what it was, he was just continually sick. He somehow found the clinic. At that point (Valley Community) was this little hole-in-the-wall on Vineland and Burbank Boulevard. He got tested and was diagnosed, and ultimately over the course of the six years I knew him, he died. He was in the graphic design business, and that's how I knew him. He was the one that said there was this really great community health center. I saw how they took care of him. I thought, oh, absolutely, I will do anything for this organization. That's what got my heart.

**How does your graphic design background influence your work now?**

Design, at least commercial design, is all about communication. Whether it's visual or written, I still incorporate that into the work I do. I redesigned the logo three or four years ago when we changed our name from clinic to healthcare. I'm always drawing stuff, trying to make a point with flip charts. There's a lot of creativity in leadership. I haven't put it aside. It's always good to leave white space, room to allow things. It doesn't detract from the main focus. That's my analogy. I think some people call it breathing room – I just call it white space. The artist in me doesn't like to control the plan. I like to collaborate.

**How would you describe your management style?**

I'm an open leader. I'm a real strategic thinker. I always try to look over the next hill and identify where the organization fits and where we need to go, and I try to communicate that back to others, to our staff. I'm pointing the direction, bringing the best resources and ideas and energies, and then letting our staff lead the way. We have almost 235 employees here.

**What do you consider the most important skill for running a nonprofit?**

People skills, and a good understanding of the financial bones of the organization, because that's the heartbeat of the people. Then there's finding the resources so people can do the work. As a leader of a nonprofit, you're really drawn to the mission of the organization and that's what gets me through a really hard day. I go upstairs and I walk through some of the waiting rooms and see the patients that we're helping. That's kind of what I didn't like about advertising, because sometimes you have to work on widgets or things that aren't really that important.

**Have you thought about switching to for-profit?**

No. I just really love this organization, I live in the community, I'm so blessed to have a job here and to be able to see our organization grow and staff that has been here longer than I have. There's probably a dozen of us that have been here for 20 or more years. That really speaks to the organization. I call that group the 'oldies but goodies.'

**Have fundraising efforts become easier or harder?**

I came up through the fundraising ranks. I was the director of development for many years and that kind of segued into strategic marketing and planning. I think it's very challenging in the San Fernando Valley because we have to compete with the west side and Hollywood, and the glitz and the glamor. We're all used to that kind of caliber of fundraising, and if you're not that kind of an organization or in that part of Los Angeles, it's challenging.

**How about fundraising events?**

Right now we – the global "we" – are getting tired of events. It's more and more challenging to get people to come to our events because the bar is set very, very high in Hollywood. You have to have the celebrity and the hotel and all that, and it's very expensive. People are tired of doing that, and I'm hearing about non-events, or one-hour fundraising, like on your radio – they're trying to make it in a smaller bite.

**Where is fundraising headed in the future?**

The key to fundraising has always been the connection, the one-on-one connection with relationships. For me, because I've been here for so long, I've developed a lot of relationships. For someone coming in new, I think that would be more of a challenge. (However) this organization has grown over the last year – we've doubled. At the heart of that was the Affordable Care Act. A lot of our fundraising efforts have focused on grant writing and of course federal funding. There isn't really a lot of state funding, county, and then our private sector fundraising. Our private sector fundraising has been kind of flat.

**What's the challenge on the private side?**

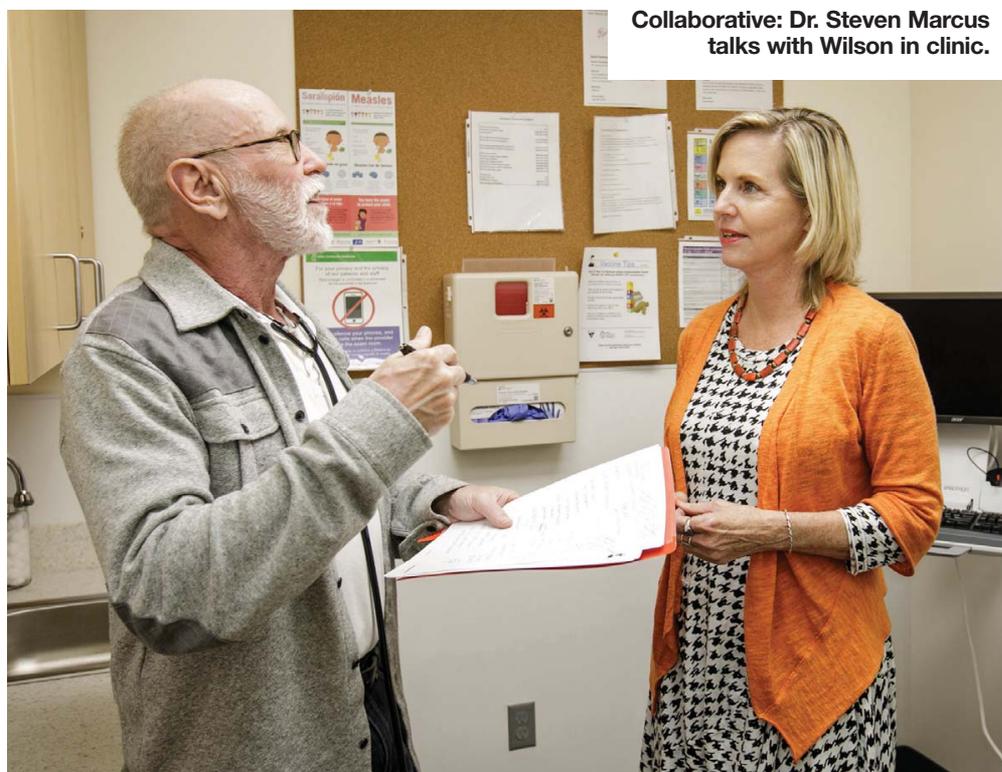
There's a mindset that because we are receiving federal funding, that fills in all the gaps, and because we're larger now, there must



Valley  
Community  
Healthcare

Helping Hand: Organization's logo designed by Wilson.

Collaborative: Dr. Steven Marcus talks with Wilson in clinic.



be funding coming from other places. We still need community support, we still need volunteers, funds for equipment and capital expansion, startup things. We used to be very tiny, and you could come in and see holes in the carpet. You could actually see that physical need. Right now, we don't have that. We're building, we're redoing some of the space, but the need for more of our services is still huge.

**How about convincing people to donate?**

The other part that's hard for us is if you're talking to people in the hospital in terms of fundraising, we're not seen as saving somebody's life. We don't have patients like in the hospital, coming in with a very serious accident. We prevent measles and strep throat and manage your diabetes. We're not seen as saving lives. Down the line, we can get to our patients early enough and give them immunizations and the education; hopefully we can keep them out of the hospital.

**How does Valley Healthcare connect with businesses?**

There are many layers of that, but obviously fundraiser support, developing partnerships. Our board is made up of businesspeople. We're always trying to engage the corporate world and find leaders and volunteers to serve and bring skills and expertise to the organization.

**What are your favorite stories about the organization?**

We hire, through our teen clinic, kids that are