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Health department celebrates 50 years

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MIDDLETON — Jane Keon grew up in St. Louis, a small town devastated by a toxic chemical mix-up that continues to result in elevated poison levels in people's blood throughout Michigan today. When Keon grew up, she mobilized her community to protect water and fight toxic pollution, taking the fight all the way to the EPA in Washington, D.C.

When John Switzer learned there was high levels of fecal matter in the Upper Maple River, he obtained grant funding to implement a watershed management plan, then leveraged a grant to assist other watersheds developing plans for the Flat River and the Pine River.

Robert Clingenpeel, the director of the Montcalm County Commission on Aging and incoming Montcalm County controller-administrator, brought a meals on wheels program for senior citizens to the county, created the county's new Department of Military and Veteran Services and supports Healthy Montcalm and Leadership Montcalm.

These are just three snapshots of personal stories shared Tuesday during

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Health Officer Marcus Cheatham, left, listens as Orlando Todd of Local Public Health Services at the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services presents the Mid-Michigan District Health Department with a plaque congratulating the health department on 50 years of public health service.

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Health Department

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the Mid-Michigan District Health Department's 50th anniversary celebration. About 150 people attended the event at New Haven Church of the Brethren in Middleton, including current and retired employees and administrators, community partners and Sen. Judy Emmons.

Emmons, R-Sheridan, presented Health Officer Marcus Cheatham with a resolution in honor of the anniversary, signed by Gov. Rick Snyder and other state legislators.

"We are so appreciative of the services you provide here in rural Michigan," Emmons told the audience. "We appreciate your leadership. Thank you for all you do for all of us."

The health department was created in 1966 in the basement of the former Montcalm County courthouse to serve Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties. Prior to that time, the three counties had operated as separate health department units. The three-county area includes 52 townships over 1,872 square miles, serving a combined population of more than 181,200 people.

The health department grew slowly but steadily, from just two employees in its first year to more than 70 employees today. The department issued its first food permit in 1967 to the Danish Kingdom in Stanton. As times changed, so did the health department: Creating AIDS and STD awareness programs in the 1980s, losing half its employees during Michigan's recession in the 1980s, rebounding and modernizing in the 1990s.

The health department relocated to its current headquarters in Stanton in 1997. Branch offices are also located in Ithaca and St. Johns.

Cheatham shared how health department staff work with a variety of people in difficult situations throughout the three counties, including low income families, abused women and single parents.

"We deal with a lot of people who are hurt," he said. "We deal with a lot of tough situations. This is what we do, we turn people around."

The health department has worked under nine medical directors, including Dr. Jennifer Morse, who took over last year, as well as three health officers, including Kimberly Singh from 1996 to 2012; and currently Cheatham who took the position in 2012. Additional administrative staff currently includes Administrative Services Division Director Melissa Bowerman, Community Health & Education Division Director Andrea Tabor and Environmental Health Division Director Bob Gouin.

Kimberly Singh, left, who retired as a health officer in 2012 and now works with My Community Dental Centers, and Jack Enderle, a former Clinton County commissioner and member of the Michigan Board of Health and the Mid-Michigan District Health Department Board of Health, were honored for their years of service during Tuesday's health department 50th anniversary celebration.

Nine people were honored Tuesday as Public Health Champions, including:

• Environmental health: Keon, past president of the Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force; Switzer, director of the Clinton Conservation District; and Tim Keeton, a professor at Alma College who worked with students to sample water from the Pine River to obtain data to be shared with the community.

• Personal health: Clingenpeel; Jodie Faber, director of Spectrum Health United Lifestyles, who has helped with comprehensive prevention programs, the Baby Friendly Hospital initiative and Fitkids and supports the Montcalm Human Services Coalition and Healthy Montcalm; Deb Kloosterman, retired coordinator of the Building Stronger Communities Council. She previously won the Champion for Children award from the Child Abuse Neglect Council, expanded wraparound services for children's mental health and supports Great Start and Project Connect.

• Former employees/Board of Health: Dr. Robert Graham, who retired as the health department's medical director last year. He helped the health department achieve national accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board. He recently received the Jean Chabut Health Policy Champion award for individuals who have made significant contributions toward the health and wellbeing of Michigan citizens.

Jack Enderle, former Clinton County commissioner and former member of the Mid-Michigan District Health Department and Michigan Board of Health. He helped secure a grant from the National Association of Local Boards of Health and connected the health department with the Clinton Conservation District.

Singh, retired health officer who retired from the health department in 2012. Singh created the modern health department and led historic transformations there. She now works with My Community Dental Centers.

Visit mmdhd.org for more information about the Mid-Michigan District Health Department.

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