Healing hands: Throughout her 33 years in nursing, Theresa Conejo has molded herself into an “agent of social change,” working to improve healthcare access for minority populations.

PHOTO: TOM LOGUE
From the moment she graduated from Bensalem High School, Conejo wanted to put her skills and passion for helping people to practical use. After gaining some experience at a local doctor’s office, she obtained her RN in ’84 from Frankford Hospital School of Nursing, now Aria Health School of Nursing, and eventually her BSN. After spending time at several other locations, she found a home at Nazareth Hospital as a heart failure coordinator, and has been there ever since.

Throughout her 33 years in the nursing field, Conejo has molded herself into a true health leader with a particular focus on immigrants and minorities, working to improve health education and access for the Hispanic community.

“I try to be an agent of social change,” she said.

Conejo’s sole mission is to be a resource in the community, helping people to navigate the system. The biggest issue she sees when it comes to the Hispanic population is access to health care. According to Conejo, there is a severe lack of bilingual physicians and bicultural employees in general. These language barriers can present huge hurdles for Spanish speakers in need of health care, so she advocates for them.

In her spare time, Conejo serves on national awareness and advocacy committees for the AHA, including its National Minority Affairs Council. Thanks to her dedication, Spanish-language PSAs were created as well as tools for the AHA website.

Within minority groups, Conejo understands how prominent stroke can be and how most families have a loved one who suffered from one, so she advocates for more awareness.

“I help them understand why grandmom is like that,” she said.
As the board president of the Latino Alliance in Bristol, Conejo sets up after-school programs and summer camps that incorporate health lessons for Hispanic youth. Sugar is reduced, and healthy foods are served to teach kids how to care for their bodies from a young age.

Throughout the year, Conejo plans various local annual events, including Mill Street Goes Red, during which shop owners wear red in solidarity for those who suffered from heart attacks. Pins are usually sold, with the day turning into a friendly competition between businesses. This takes place in February, also known as “heart month,” along with the Bristol Heart Dinner, which she’s been hosting for three years. Each year, she was able to raise almost $7,000 for the AHA through these events.

In addition to her work throughout Bucks County, Conejo hosts an annual “Latina Luncheon” in Philadelphia, the funds for which came from being honored as an Eagles Community Quarterback and receiving a $4,000 grant. The luncheon helps spread heart and stroke awareness to Hispanic women.

Conejo has helped to make great strides in health-care access for minority populations, but she believes more steps can be taken, such as implementing cultural-friendly materials such as translation phones, and will continue to volunteer her time as an advocate until these become a reality. • •

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