"Before you today, with a cap and gown and broken heart, I am filled with hope and joy...

JACOB ZELINSKI, COMM '19, 2019 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
WATCH THE VIDEO @ MARQUETTE.EDU/COMMENCEMENT.
"Amy, meet Dessie."

With those words, a friendship began about a decade ago after their chance meeting. Dr. Amy Van Hecke, a then-new psychology professor at Marquette had opened an autism clinic on campus, and Dr. Dessie Levy, then-dean of the School of Health Sciences at Milwaukee Area Technical College, brought her granddaughter to the clinic for an evaluation. Neither could imagine where this chance meeting might lead.

Their "hello" grew into a dialogue about each woman’s work. They began exploring barriers preventing some children with autism—children of color from city neighborhoods—from receiving the same high-quality care as suburban counterparts. As Levy led Van Hecke on a journey of discovery into the lives of Milwaukee’s central city residents, the pair did something that happens too rarely in cities like Milwaukee. They stepped outside their own communities and comfort zones. They began bridging distances that weren’t so large geographically—a few blocks or a few miles—but extended much farther in terms of time and tradition. As they recognized autism’s relationships to larger unmet needs, their focus broadened into related issues of mental health and trauma. They added allies. A cascade of problems revealed cascading solutions. They dreamed bigger.

Fortunately, Van Hecke, Levy and their partners weren’t working in a vacuum. Since becoming president of Marquette in 2014, Dr. Michael R. Lovell has encouraged members of the university community to engage the communities around them in deeper ways—to be without boundaries and to renew their focus on servant leadership in partnership with those most in need.

Lovell and his wife, Amy, embarked on a quest of their own as they learned of research on the epidemic of trauma—exposures to violence, homelessness, addicted or incarcerated parents—threatening young lives in Milwaukee. They helped to form an organization, Scaling Wellness in Milwaukee, promoting trauma-informed care and community-wide responses to the epidemic.

BRIDGING THE GAP
"THEIR APPLICATION WAS NOT ONLY INNOVATIVE IN HOW IT APPROACHED EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA," SAYS DR. DAN BERGEN, "BUT IT ALSO SOUGHT TO GATHER A BROAD GROUP OF PARTNERS FROM VARIOUS BACKGROUNDS. THAT'S WHAT SET IT APART."

These convictions helped shape Lovell's early 2018 announcement of the inaugural President’s Challenge grant. Supported by the Johnson Controls Foundation, the award would provide $250,000 over two years to fund a project that would break old paradigms — or establish new ones — reaching across departmental and college lines and incorporating a community organization as a full partner in a project that aims to change the trajectory of lives in Milwaukee.

In January, these stories merged when Van Hecke and a diverse team of Marquette colleagues and community partners, including Levy, were awarded Marquette’s first President’s Challenge grant. The quality of the eight submitted proposals made for “a difficult choice,” says Lovell. Yet the plan from Van Hecke’s team to create a mental health clinic for children and families in a desperately underresourced neighborhood of the city best embodied the bold, collaborative principles of the challenge. “The energy and enthusiasm, the innovation and collaboration of the group “has been nothing less than awe-inspiring,” exclaimed Grady Crosby, vice president for public affairs and chief diversity officer at Johnson Controls, in announcing the award.

“This clinic will be a missing piece where we can really address the mental health needs and development needs of our children and their families,” says Tracey Sparrow, president of Next Door Milwaukee, which will help operate the clinic in space adjacent to its facility in Milwaukee’s Metcalfe Park. Currently, those children might face waitlists of up to a year for mental health services — delays the new clinic will slash practically to zero.

“We looked at where we were sending families to be diagnosed and treated, and it was like this ring around the city,” says Van Hecke. “Why aren't there any diagnostics in the city? So we thought, ‘That’s our biggest problem.’ And that's really where the President’s Challenge came in."

To understand how Van Hecke’s autism clinic on campus grew, a decade later, into a broad-based mental health clinic set to open later this year, start with Levy. She has served as an ambassador of sorts, to the central city for Van Hecke and a guide across barriers that can exist between care providers and people needing their care. “Marquette has a gem in Amy, in her work and her compassion,” says Levy. “A lot of people do things because it’s their profession or their job. Amy does it because she has a compassion for people.

As a first step, Levy invited Van Hecke and Dr. Norah Johnson, Grad ’01, ’09, a Marquette associate nurse professor now part of the Next Step project, to lead a community training on childhood autism, the research focus of both professors. It was part of a schedule of trainings Levy hosted for an influential group of “First Ladies.” Either pastors or pastors’ wives from a network of about 40 local Baptist churches, these women lead outreach to their congregations on difficult topics such as diabetes and obesity. Levy is a First Lady herself, in addition to being a nurse and professor. Her husband, Rev. Darrin Levy, presides over True Love Missionary Baptist Church.

The training went well and yielded progress on a long-running frustration Van Hecke faced: the reality that, despite a central location and fees that adjust based on incomes, suburbs sent plenty of children her way while few families came from nearby neighborhoods, where the need seemed greatest. “I had to ask myself, ‘Why?’” she recalls. “And the answer was that the families didn’t feel comfortable. They didn’t feel like this was a place for them.”

That epiphany had left the native Mississippian asking stubborn questions: How can Marquette, with all its academic resources, best connect with the neighborhoods in the central city? Can the university bridge the overlooked child? The First Ladies helped change that game.

Equipped with knowledge from the initial training, they explained the ins and outs of autism to their congregations: the behavioral signals, sources of help and importance of early detection and treatment. To provide continuity after that first touch, a grant to study urban children’s health disparities among others, children are hired to hire two staffers, Toney Small and Ida Winters, as family navigators. The pair took care to the next level, accompanying families to appointments, arranging follow-ups and conducting screenings. Van Hecke describes the navigators, both of whom are African American, as invaluable.

But their involvement opened up new areas of concern. They found that children with autism, and their families, often bear the scars of trauma and mental illness. “We started digging into it and found that kids with developmental delays are four times more likely to be victims of trauma,” Van Hecke says. “And moms who’ve experienced trauma are more likely to have a kid with a developmental delay. This is a bigger picture than autism.” They also found that families to endure months-long waits and travel far outside Milwaukee for mental health care.

In the inaugural President’s Challenge competition, Dr. Amy Van Hecke’s team and seven other teams proposing responses to trauma needs in the city vied for a $250,000 award.

In all, 37 Marquette faculty from eight schools across campus were included in the bids, plus 30 community partners representing 26 different community organizations.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

With its diverse on-campus and off-campus partners, the Next Step Clinic leverages an impressive array of expertise to meet a critical community need.

Dr. Iqbal Ahamed
Computer Sciences
Dr. Abir Bekhet
Nursing
Dr. Mary Carlson
Educational Policy and Leadership
Tim Coughlin
Milwaukee SUCCEEDS and United Way
Marina Gillin-Graves
Mental Health America of WIs.
Leah Jepson
Mental Health America of WIs.
Dr. Norah Johnson
Nursing
Dr. Lynne Knooblin-Fedders
Counselor Education and School Psychology
Wendy Krueger
Speech Pathology and Auditory
Rev. Walter Lanier
MATC and MARCULE Network
Dr. Desse Levy
General Baptist State Convention and True Love Outreach Center
Dr. Alexandra Martins
Theology and Nursing
Linda Menck
Communications
Dr. Steve Saunders
Psychology
Toney Small
Psychology staff
Dr. Tracey Sparrow
Next Door Foundation
Ida Winters
Mental Health America of WIs.

Leah Jepson, project director for the Milwaukee Coalition for Children’s Mental Health at Mental Health America of Wisconsin, a co-director and partner in the clinic aligned with United Way, MATC and others.

Graduate students from Marquette and other area schools will provide care in the clinic, supervised by Marquette faculty, helping to build a pipeline of psychologists and social workers equipped to handle the trauma and systemic racism experienced in the central city.

“We’re very deprived of psychologists in Wisconsin, generally,” Van Hecke says. “If you narrow it to psychologists who know autism or childhood trauma, it’s even worse. So we can solve another problem with this clinic.

This grand initiative was unlike anything I’ve seen around the country,” says Dr. Dan Bergen, Grad ’11, executive director of the Office of Community Engagement at Marquette. “It’s not common for universities to put this type of grant money out there.

Their application was not only innovative in how it approached early childhood mental health and trauma,” says Bergen, “but it also sought to gather a broad group of partners from various backgrounds. That’s what sets it apart.”

Also noted: the existing relationships built over a decade. “It was based on our history of working together,” says Levy. “We were praying for success of this project.”