



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

The Doctors Goodwill Foundation will host a Masquerade Ball on Thursday, Nov. 1, at the Space Coast Convention Center in Cocoa. Open to the public, people attending this fundraiser can help DGF 'remove the mask and shatter the stigma of opioid addiction and suicide' in the community. Tickets and sponsorships are available for the Masquerade Ball. DGF is working with a coalition of partners to address the opioid crisis in Brevard. From left: Sonal Shah, a retired pharmacist; Dr. Kantilal Bhalani, DGF founder; Gita Bhalani; Randy Mortensen, DGF board advisor; Sue Tindall, DGF administrative assistant; and Dr. Ashish Udeshi, DGF president. They are at the Space Coast Health Foundation's new Center for Collaboration.

## Doctors Goodwill Foundation to address opioid crisis; event set for Nov. 1

By Ken Datzman

For 15 years running, the Doctors Goodwill Foundation has assisted with charitable medical endeavors locally, regionally, and internationally — everything from hurricanes to earthquakes. As an organization, it has worked to make lives better in some way.

Now, the nonprofit entity is taking on what it says is the biggest challenge in its history — the opioid crisis in Brevard County, where lives are being lost and families are being devastated.

The Doctors Goodwill Foundation is working collaboratively to bring programs and solutions to the community in an attempt to save lives and get addicted people on the road to recovery. Along the way, it also hopes society will cast aside the stigma of substance abuse and the implicit

bias and labels that go with it.

"Lives are being lost in Brevard because of opioid addiction. We want to save lives. The Doctors Goodwill Foundation is going to be on the frontier of this crisis. And we're going to work to change the stigma of opioid addiction," said Dr. Kantilal Bhalani, founder of the Doctors Goodwill Foundation and a longtime practicing obstetrician and gynecologist.

The Doctors Goodwill Foundation is sponsoring a "Masquerade Ball" from 6–9 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 1, at the Space Coast Convention Center in Cocoa. This public event will raise funds for the Doctors Goodwill Foundation, which is committed to leading a multifaceted movement focusing on "shattering the stigma of opioid addiction and suicide" in Brevard County and beyond.

The event is being supported by the Brevard County Opioid Abuse Task Force,

which includes area leaders in law enforcement, the criminal justice system, treatment centers and recovery centers. The Task Force's goal is to provide education and resources in the community as it addresses this epidemic. Partnering in this initiative is the Brevard Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition led by Stanley Brizz, its chairman.

Statistics show from 2014–2016, Brevard County was No. 2 in the state in

opioid-related overdoses.

Also, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 2, the Doctors Goodwill Foundation will host its annual "Living Strong Health Expo" at the Space Coast Convention Center. The event, free of charge to the community, will feature health screenings, and information and lectures of interest to families, senior citizens and caregivers. There will be exhibits, too.

"We have done programs on many

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## Doctors Goodwill Foundation

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levels, including internationally, and will continue to do that with our medical missions, but we are clearly seeing that we need to take action and do some programs in our own backyard to save lives here as well," said Dr. Ashish Udeshi, president of the Doctors Goodwill Foundation.

"One of our strategies is to help people get assistance in areas where they may not have had assistance available to them before. As an organization, we are here to help people who have challenges in life."

Randy Mortensen, a former business executive who is a board advisor to the Doctors Goodwill Foundation, said there are "tons of negatives associated with this issue. We realize the work we have ahead. One of our missions is to facilitate the cooperation of people in the corporate world, in the medical community, in government, in law enforcement — Brevard County Sheriff Wayne Ivey is very supportive of this initiative — and we want to weave in the faith community, too."

"One of the Foundation's stated goals is to put Brevard County on the map as far as developing a viable solution for this crisis," added Mortensen, an entrepreneur who for the last 13 years has led the humanitarian organization "World Wide Village."

There are between 23 to 25 million people who are in recovery in the U.S. today, as it relates to drugs, alcohol, and other additions, he said. "But there are probably between 20 and 22 million other people who should be in recovery. The ridiculous thing is only 10 percent of these people will seek help this year. So there are another 18 to 20 million who aren't getting help for a variety of reasons."

"An individual should not be afraid to reach out and seek help if he or she has a substance-abuse disorder," said Dr. Bhalani, adding that choosing when and where to use certain language and labels can help reduce stigma and discrimination toward substance abuse and recovery.

Addiction researchers at the University of Pennsylvania say it is time to stop using "addict" and "alcoholic" when talking about people with substance-use disorders. The researchers say they found these terms are "associated with a strong negative bias."

Last year, the "Associated Press" recommended that news organizations use "person-first" language and avoid terms such as "addict."

Drug overdose deaths in America continue to rise and are being fueled by synthetic opioids. Drug overdoses killed 63,632 Americans in 2016, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nearly two-thirds of these deaths (66 percent) involved a prescription or an illicit opioid.

Overdose deaths increased in all categories of drugs examined for men and women, people ages 15 and older across all races and ethnicities, as well as all levels of urbanization.

"The opioid epidemic is now having an impact on life expectancy in America," said Naren Shah, executive director of the Doctors Goodwill Foundation. "Life expectancy has fallen in the United States for the second year in row and drug-related deaths are a factor. That is a very powerful statistic, a very powerful statement."

Life expectancy has ticked down a bit, according to researchers at the National Health Center for Health Statistics, a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A baby born in the U.S. in 2016 could expect to live 78.6 years, a decrease of more than a month from 2015 and more than two months from 2014.

The National Health Center released two reports last year. One dissected all causes of death and the other focused on drug-overdose deaths. This was the first reported two-year life-expectancy decline since 1962 and 1963, when there were spikes in flu deaths in America. Before 2015, the last one-year decline was in 1993, around the time the HIV/AIDS health crisis began to subside.

Today, 100 million people in America battle chronic pain and are searching for instant relief. They often turn to prescription pain medications for treatment.

"When it comes to chronic pain, there are multiple treatments available for patients," said Dr. Udeshi, who is board certified in pain management and anesthesiology. "In the past, there was this thought process that there was only one option and one pill that could magically fix the solution. Unfortunately, we are seeing that is not the case. Medication may have a role, however, it is not the only role that's played in treating a patient with pain. It requires a multidisciplinary strategy."

Dr. Udeshi said in the last two years roughly 300 lives have been lost in Brevard because of opioid addiction. "It's a big challenge and requires a multifaceted approach involving a team of people. It's not a one-solution issue. We need the support of government officials, law enforcement, physicians, psychologists, mental-health providers, and corporations and businesses to work together to create effective solutions. We need to do community outreach, too. The opioid crisis can affect anybody. It's a community challenge that will require the community coming together."

Dr. Bhalani said about "one-third of babies born in Brevard are born addicted," exposed to opioids in utero, or have what's called neonatal abstinence syndrome.

"If those babies stay more than seven to 10 days in the hospital, it costs \$93,000 to treat each newborn for withdrawal. So if we get out front on this and treat the mother, it's going to have a significant positive impact all-round."

Neonatal abstinence syndrome refers to cases in which newborns experience drug

withdrawal shortly after birth because of drug exposure in utero. This is a condition on the rise across the nation, coinciding with a surge in the use of opioids.

Research by the March of Dimes has shown that the use or abuse of opioids during pregnancy is associated with a significantly increased risk of poor birth outcomes, such as low birthweight.

In 2016, more than 4,000 babies were born at Florida hospitals addicted to opioids, according to the state's Agency for Healthcare Administration. That's an increase of more than 1,000 percent from a decade ago. Substance abuse played a role in two-thirds of the cases where children were removed from their homes within 30 days of birth in 2016.

Nationally, the number of pregnant women with opioid-use disorder at the time of labor and delivery more than quadrupled from 1999 to 2014, according to a new analysis released in August 2018 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These findings illustrate the "devastating impact of the opioid epidemic on families across the U.S., including on the very youngest," the report said.

Brevard County has its own challenges battling neonatal abstinence syndrome.

"There are on average 5,000 babies born in Brevard on an annual basis," said Mortensen. "So one-third of them, or about 1,500 babies, are born addicted because of various reasons. One of our goals is to be a catalyst behind raising awareness in Brevard as far as the crisis level of opioid use. We want to bring a resolution."

Recently, Gov. Rick Scott signed legislation limiting most painkiller prescriptions to a three-day supply in response to the opioid crisis killing Floridians every day. The law also directs \$53 million in grants to treatment plans.

The Masquerade Ball (formal attire/costumes) will raise money for the Doctors Goodwill Foundation's initiatives and strategies to overcome the opioid crisis in the county.

"Our attendance goal for this event is 400 people," said Mortensen.

"The funds we raise from the Ball will go toward resources to help people with their recovery from substance abuse, and they will go toward suicide prevention, which is the third leading cause of death among young people," said Dr. Udeshi. In 2016, nearly 45,000 Americans age 10 or older died by suicide. Suicide is the 10th-leading cause of death and is one of just three leading causes of death that are on the rise, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Individual tickets are \$150 to attend the Masquerade Ball. There will be Indian cuisine, a silent auction, including two roundtrip tickets to India, a prize for the "Best Mask," and a 50-50 drawing.

Sponsorships for the event range from \$500 to \$35,000 (one Platinum Level

Sponsorship). There are amenities at each level of support. Five of the sponsorship levels include tables that seat 10 people at the Masquerade Ball, as well as promotional opportunities for your business.

To purchase tickets or to inquire about being a sponsor of the event, visit [DoctorsFoundation.org](http://DoctorsFoundation.org), or call 735-6492.

Mortensen said the Masquerade Ball sponsorship money will help fund the creation of local jobs such as "Peer Recovery Support Specialists." A Peer Recovery Support Specialist must complete a rigorous training process and have a desire to help others achieve a life of recovery, he said.

"The Doctors Goodwill Foundation is a nonprofit. So we are not doing this for a profit. But we are in the jobs-creation business with this event. The top-tier sponsor levels will create two of these jobs in Brevard. We plan to train four or five more people to be Peer Recovery Support Specialists. These are people who have been down that road themselves and are in stable recovery," said Mortensen.

The word peer refers to individuals who share the experiences of addiction and recovery. In a peer-helping-peer relationship, a peer leader or coach who is in stable recovery provides social support designed to fill the needs of people in or seeking recovery.

"Long-term inpatient treatment programs have become progressively more expensive to the point where a 30-day stay may cost from \$35,000 to \$45,000," said Mortensen. "Insurance companies are becoming less willing to fund a patient's first treatment program because seven out of eight people coming out of an intensive in-patient treatment program relapse. There is a better solution, and we believe we can be part of it. It's called an intensive outpatient program, or IOP."

The goal of IOPs is to help patients practice recovery-management skills and techniques while transitioning to independent living. An IOP operates on a small scale and does not require the intensive residential or partial-day services typically offered by comprehensive treatment facilities.

The Masquerade Ball is a first step for the Doctors Goodwill Foundation to raise money and move closer toward implementing some of its strategies in fighting the opioid war, which is seen as a public-health emergency.

"We want the Masquerade Ball to be the most successful event we've had in our 15 years so we can fund resources and help people overcome their disorders," said Dr. Bhalani. "We are at a critical point in the community right now in dealing with this issue that is destroying lives. With everyone working together with a single mission in mind, we can find solutions to this crisis and save lives. But we need the support of the people," he said.