

**Richmond Times-Dispatch**

*Person  
of the  
Year*

**2018 Honoree**



**Karen Legato**  
**Health Brigade**

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## Serving the underserved: Karen Legato, Health Brigade executive director

Bill Lohmann

Dec 17, 2018



Karen Legato, executive director of **Health Brigade**, began to make difficult decisions during an unprecedented public health disaster. CLEMENT BRITT

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Bill Lohmann

**K**aren Legato comes naturally by her empathy and compassion for marginalized communities.

She grew up in one.

Of Lebanese descent, Legato recalls the "welcome" her family received when they moved into a new neighborhood in Roanoke in the 1960s: a racist slur written in shaving cream on the family car and eggs splattered against their home.

Legato was picked on at school because of her ethnicity. There was even the time a friend's mother offered lemonade to a group of playmates but refused to serve Legato, telling her she had to go home and "drink out of your own glasses."

"I learned early on these were the kinds of things you dealt with ... so I don't have a hard time at all understanding what's happening now," Legato said of how people on society's fringes can be perceived.

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Legato believes she is in an ideal role as executive director of Health Brigade, which in 2018 marks its 50th year as Virginia's first free clinic (and was long known as Fan Free Clinic). Health Brigade provides an array of health services to low-income and uninsured people and aims to be, as its website says, "a safe place to seek care for those who need it the most."

"Karen has the gift of bridging communities that might be at odds with each other," said Bill Harrison, president and executive director of Diversity Richmond, an LGBTQ+ organization that has partnered with Health Brigade on several projects over the years. "I can think of no better example than the work she has led in the transgender community in Richmond with health care providers."

The organization has always prided itself on being at the forefront of care for vulnerable communities. Formed in 1968 and incorporated two years later, the clinic was patterned after similar efforts in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood.

In the early years, it championed women's access to oral contraceptives and provided primary care to the poor and uninsured. In the 1980s and 1990s, the clinic was on the front lines of the AIDS pandemic, sending out care teams to sick patients and launching HIV/AIDS education and prevention.

Fan Free Clinic changed its name to Health Brigade in 2016, a handle better reflective of its broader scope. Among other things, it now puts a greater emphasis on mental health, and it has developed such courses as “Food Farmacy,” a program for diabetic patients that offers fresh produce and nutrition education. Its office also is no longer in the Fan, having moved to Thompson Street next to the Downtown Expressway.

"Through Karen’s leadership, Health Brigade has expanded their outreach," Harrison said. "They save lives every day."

Legato has worked in the nonprofit realm for three decades, and she also served as a youth and young adult minister in the 1990s. She joined Health Brigade in 2010 from Friends Association for Children, a child and family services organization where she was director of service programs.

She became familiar with medical social work in an earlier job where she helped patch together resources for mostly older, impoverished homebound patients, which opened her eyes to severe poverty. Legato said she once made a house call to a home “in the middle of a cornfield with no windows and snakes hanging from the ceiling.”

One thing that didn’t surprise her about that job was the genuineness of the patients – or the fact that she enjoyed the work. As the youngest of six, she said she had grown up as something of an “old soul,” having accompanied her mother on visits to the homes of older people shut off from the world.

Legato said her parents raised their children with this lesson about the shared journey of human beings:

"They all carry burdens like we carry burdens," she said. "You don’t make a character judgment, because you don’t know what they live with – or what they’ve lived through."

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## **IN HER WORDS: KAREN LEGATO**

*executive director, Health Brigade*

**Hometown:** Roanoke

**Family:** husband Peter

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**What is something about yourself that might come as a surprise to others?**

My parents gave birth to me when they were in their 40s. I used to help my father with home improvement jobs beginning at age 8. I would hand him tools from the skinny walkboard we shared on the outside of a building while I peered down three stories below us. This gave me a lifelong love for working with tools and physical labor projects.

I also love to sit on rooftops and play guitar – unfortunately, I physically can't manage it anymore.

**If you could spend a day with a historical or fictional character, who would it be?**

Bob Dylan. Obviously, I think the Nobel committee was on to something when they selected him as a laureate. Some people who can't stand his voice still respect his poetry. He has a gift for teaching history in a way that's really accessible to me, because his stories are told through a social justice lens, and they're expressed through visceral, physical music.

I'd love to talk with him about the way he documents history and what inspired him to take the path he took.

**Tell us about a setback or disappointment and what you learned from it.**

I've always navigated my world grounded in hands-on touch, movement and physical exertion. So when I developed some health issues over the past few years, I've had to face the stark reality that I can no longer maintain the same pace; I am not invincible.

This has taught me to slow down, meditate more and become selective in channeling my passion and commitments. I'm learning to delegate more, eat well and rest. Ironically, these are some of the same healthy behaviors we teach our patients and clients at Health Brigade. Once again in my life, I am reminded to "walk the talk."

**What is something you haven't done that you'd really like to do?**

I value making meaning out of what's in front of me, not chasing something out of reach. I will say, though, that it would give me great joy to visit the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Ala. – and to see my "adopted" elephant in Kenya.

**If you had to pick a different profession or course of study, what would you choose?**

Anthropology. I love the study of people and how they make meaning with their cultural and religious symbols. Understanding others, especially those vastly different from me, gives me insight into the connectedness of the human family. and our shared ancestry as a species

### **What is your favorite book, movie, etc.?**

I love reading mostly nonfiction journals, articles and even textbooks. However, there is one fiction trilogy I've read at least four times that completely takes me away every time. "The Deed of Paksenarrion," by Elizabeth Moon, is a fantasy novel, but I'm not a fantasy reader!

The author is a military veteran who creates a world with believable military issues, with a heroine who navigates them with strategy and skill. Paksenarrion is a strong female warrior in a largely male-dominated profession. The novel follows her as she evolves into her truest self without compromising her integrity. She begins as a sheep farmer's daughter, and she gains the respect of both women and men as she faces her own demons and those of the world around her.

Paksenarrion is set apart by her irrepressible hope, expansive goodness and vulnerability, and it's precisely these qualities that bring her victory. She refuses to feed the base parts of herself and finds that an appeal to "our better angels" doesn't make her a doormat but instead gives her the strength to overcome difficult situations.

Somehow the author manages this without dipping into sentimentality, probably because her world is so smartly created. The power of this story reminds me of the strength of goodness and generosity in the real world. Every time I read it, I feel like I can go out and conquer life again, no matter what comes my way.

### **Describe a small moment in your life that has had a lasting impact on you.**

Nearly 25 years ago, my friend and I had just invested in Rollerblades (a big investment at that time). We took them out one evening to a large, hilly, empty parking lot and skate-chased each other across the pavement. Watching him lean into figure-eights at high speeds with grace and no fear, I knew in that moment that our life energy was connected. This was it!

Several months later, we got engaged. Years later, we are still playing together: In 2019, we will be celebrating 25 years of an amazing marriage., punctuated by the common events along the human journey – births, deaths, transitions, celebrations and continued evolution

Our partnership is the well from which I drink every day – the water that refreshes me and sustains me in my vocation of serving others. I am honored and blessed to walk with a life partner whose love is both grounding and uplifting. And the impact continues ...

## **If you could deliver a message to a large audience, what would it be?**

Live your passion, love fiercely, and forgive often.

## **What is your greatest strength and your greatest weakness?**

People tell me I'm good at helping others discover and utilize their own potential. Hearing people's stories inspires me to reflect back to them the potential I see. Nurturing that potential often results in others stepping up and doing things they never thought they could do.

My greatest weakness is my inability to be realistic about time. I cram in more commitments than are humanly possible in a finite amount of time. Add to that my weakness of not asking for help, and we have the perfect storm for running late or just arriving in the nick of time.

## **Who is your role model?**

My mother, who passed away at 94, modeled for me how to live and die well. She was creative, fun-loving, hardworking, feisty and passionate. Her sense of humor was second to none. Most people revered her great cooking, which was her way of loving and welcoming people from all walks of life.

Her greatest lesson to me was the importance of having compassion for others. She often said, "We never know what burdens others carry, so we should never judge." As a first generation Lebanese-American, she grew up extremely poor and faced the prejudice and oppression that many marginalized groups face. Yet she turned her pain into productivity, appreciation for beauty and a love affair with life itself.

## **What is your favorite thing about the Richmond region?**

Richmond has a surprising amount of diversity: food, ethnicity, multigenerations, etc. There's a great mix of people who grew up here and those who moved from other places.

The city offers exposure to a wide range of experiences that aren't necessarily available in other towns, while retaining a personal, welcoming, familiar sensibility. It's a place we can reach out and explore, without being overwhelmed or cut off from our past.

Of course, it's also great to be so close to mountains, the beach, and other urban and rural areas.