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—Yasser Aman

Running Free Clinic in South-Central Los Angeles, Executive M.P.H. Student Puts “Faith into Action”

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, **YASSER AMAN** was a UCLA undergraduate majoring in molecular biology and intending to enroll in medical school. But something happened along the way. Aman began to volunteer at the upstart UMMA (University Muslim Medical Association) free clinic, founded by UCLA and Charles R. Drew University students as a place for the indigent and underserved community of South-Central Los Angeles to receive no-cost health care from volunteer physicians and medical students. “I fell in love with the place, and I realized there was more to health than medicine,” Aman says. In 1999, a year out of college, Aman was named executive director and CEO of the clinic. He was 24.

UMMA, though conceived as a vehicle for the Muslim community to provide service, is run by and for the community at large. The vast majority of the patients are Latino and African American, many of whom have no employment-based insurance and do not qualify for Medi-Cal; volunteer physicians come from all over Southern California, UCLA medical students fulfill their third-year community medicine rotation there, and UCLA undergraduates continue to follow in Aman’s footsteps as volunteers.

After his meteoric rise to the leadership position at UMMA, Aman realized he knew little about health services management. He began to aggressively educate himself, enrolling in extension classes and, eventually, in the school’s executive style M.P.H. for Health Professionals in Health Services Management program.

There’s been no shortage of challenges in running a free clinic at a time when fiscal woes have led to the closure of 11 Los Angeles County-run clinics, many of which were initial access points for the uninsured. “I’m struggling to figure out how we’re going to handle the influx of patients,” Aman says. Although UMMA has few paying positions, securing the funding needed to cover overhead costs is becoming increasingly difficult as the economy suffers and foundations tend to be more attracted to start-up projects. Meanwhile, the 3,000-square-foot facility seems

smaller every day as the waiting rooms overflow with patients. (UMMA hasn’t needed to advertise its services since 1996, the year it first opened its doors.)

Aman says his ability to meet these challenges has been greatly enhanced by the M.P.H. program, in which he has begun his second year. “It’s an amazing program, especially for people who are in a management position,” he says. “From the beginning, I would learn something one day and implement it the next. That practical knowledge is so helpful.”

His appetite whetted, Aman is considering continuing his studies in the school’s Dr.P.H. program. But regardless of his future educational plans, he has no intention of leaving UMMA any time soon. “This clinic is like my baby,” he says, “and I plan to be here to help it mature.” From a personal standpoint, Aman, himself a Muslim, says the most rewarding aspect of going to work every day is that “It’s an obligation for every Muslim to help humanity, and I am fulfilling that obligation. This position enables me to put faith into action.”

