

Our Town

He's not just playing 'footsie'

Local podiatrist uses cartoons to fight youth drug use

By Cherly Scott
Bulletin Staff Writer

If a little imagination can go a long way, think what a lot of it could do.

When Dr. Martin Marks opened his podiatry practice in Compton in 1969, he did so with the intention of doing the most good in an area that needed it.

Back then he was one of few physicians in the city specializing in foot care. Having recently arrived from New York with his mother, he quickly built up a practice as the podiatrist for many local labor unions.

"My mother worked in my office until she died in 1986," he told *The Bulletin*. "My uncle came out from back East and asked me if I ever considered doing something with my art. I had always had a talent for drawing, and my family had tried to get me to go to art school, but I chose podiatry instead."

By that time, he had purchased a building on Compton Boulevard on the advice of his accountant. He soon bought the adjacent properties and opened up a foot clinic.

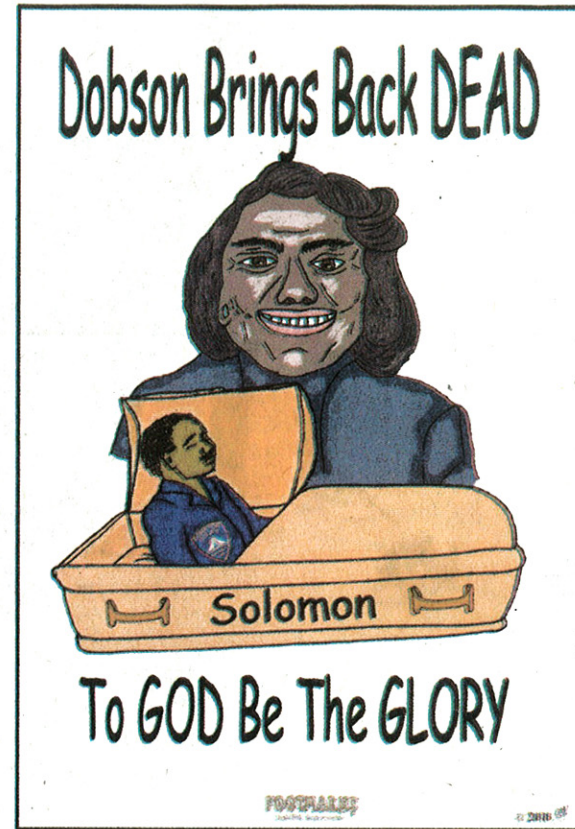
"The office was very nice," he said. "It looked like something you would find in Beverly Hills. The furniture and fixtures were high-quality, and the patients seemed to enjoy coming there."

Just three years after opening his practice, he became active in sponsoring inner-city youth sports, which led to the establishment of his nonprofit program, Footsteps Sports Club, Inc., in 1973. He said he aimed, with the nonprofit, to allow kids to feel that they were part of a team while impressing upon them positive values including education, teamwork and sobriety.

The club at its height had four basketball teams, two baseball teams and a cheerleading squad, Marks said.

Known by many as "Dr. Footsie," Marks quickly became known for his offbeat personality as well as his medical skills and often entertained patients by doodling cartoon characters based on the likeness of a foot.

The doodles soon snowballed into plans for a cable television access show based on his little foot cartoons. While the show never materialized, Dr. Footsie's characters remained intact, and he



Courtesy of Dr. Martin Marks

These two political cartoons created by Dr. Martin Marks parody Mayor Eric J. Perrodin's sketchy council meeting attendance over the last year or so and Councilwoman Lille Dobson's repetitive use of the same phrase, her support of the mayor's plan to bring back the Compton Police Department and her owning a mortuary. Marks just recently began experimenting with editorial cartoons after several decades of drawing feet-based cartoon characters aimed at steering kids away from drug use and involvement in gangs.

continued to develop them.

Those characters started out solely based on feet; there was Betty Bunion, Sad Sock, Humongous the Fungus and Willie Wart, and all of them fit into a storyline that promoted foot care.

Deciding to take his cartoons a step further by creating characters that advocate against youth violence and drug use, he developed a pilot program aimed at preventing students from becoming involved with drugs and dangerous behavior.

The first school to try the idea was Optimal Christian Academy, which started the program in 1992. It targeted second- and third-graders and featured slides of his cartoon characters, each aptly named and delivering a message warning of risky behavior.

Toebacco is a teenager named Nick, who earns his nickname because he becomes addicted to smoking cigarettes. Topsy Toe is an alcoholic. Toebo the Hobo loses his home because of his drug use. All of the cartoon narratives

have one thing in common — a happy ending in which the character has overcome his habit and improved his life.

By the early 1990s, Marks had created the Soles of Sorrow, or SOS, Theater. It featured an eight-foot sneaker, using a 50-foot fire hose as the shoestring, that served as the stage for four of his cartoon characters he'd brought to life as giant puppets known as the "New Feet on the Street."

When the New Feet performed, they offered valuable lessons on the health risks of drug addiction and smoking and the danger of gangs, and the cast of characters quickly grew to more than 30. This grew into the K.I.C.K. campaign, or "Keeping it Clean with Knowledge."

Marks also developed a smoking prevention program aimed at youth in kindergarten through third grade, the 20 Tips Anti-Smoking Campaign. A similar program dubbed the "Butt-Kickers Society" touted the same ideas

but was geared toward older youth and young adults.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has partnered with Marks most recently, with several of its elementary schools, including Leapwood Elementary School in Carson, signing on for his 20 Tips program, which he presented at the 2009 National Conference on Tobacco or Health.

Marks said he hopes to one day get his program into local, Compton schools, but that the school district had not appeared interested in his programs on the occasions he's presented them.

"I think the cartoons capture the attention of kids," he said, "and the messages we send through them is something that will help them make better choices in their lives."

Marks recently started on a few new ideas.

"We are in the process of establishing a multi-purpose artistic studio encompassing graphic arts, silk-screening,

cartooning with animation, puppetry and audio-visual training," he said. "We want to encourage the youth of our inner cities to use their creativity toward a positive goal."

"Our focus is to divert high-risk youth from negative street activities to avenues of creative expression, which will have a major impact on their lives," Marks said.

Another new venture is more of a personal pursuit. He has expanded his cartooning out beyond foot-based characters and has taken on the art of editorial, or political, cartooning. Marks had in recent months taken a number of hot-button issues in the Compton community and parodied them in picture.

He is hoping to establish a name for himself with press-related organizations throughout the region and beyond. For now, he is hoping to find a publication that will publish his political cartoons on at least a semi-regular basis.

Marks was forced to leave his podiatry practice for health reasons several years ago, but today he is slowly getting back into business. However, red tape in the modern-day medical system and adapting to medical billing technology has been a challenge.

"I've been working for months to solve each problem as it has come up," he said. "But the medical system has changed quite a bit since I left it. I have my license to practice, and I'm currently working on getting set up so that I can treat Medicare and Medi-Cal patients, as well as those covered by private insurance."

Meanwhile he maintains an in-home foot care service for seniors and those with limited mobility.

In association with his nonprofit, Marks is seeking volunteers. Help is needed to keep up the maintenance and repair of buildings, and volunteers with artistic, athletic or organizational talents are especially needed to operate the youth programs.

"I already have a very active core of volunteers, who do wonderful work for our programs," he said. "But we can always use more."

And, as a nonprofit, financial contributions are always welcome, as well, he said.

To volunteer or get more information about Marks, his practice and his programs, log on to DrFootsie.org or call Marks at 310-639-3338.