Gesundheit! Institute part of the imagination

by Vicki Smith

Associated Press

HILLSBORO, W.Va. - The hit Robin Williams movie "Patch Adams" ends on a feel-good note, with the audience told that construction of a free hospital is under way in West Virginia.

That's Hollywood. In the mountains of West Virginia, the project exists mostly in the imagination

There is no hospital, just a hodgepodge of buildings, some half-finished.

Dr. Hunter D. "Patch" Adams has been raising money for his cause since the early '70s-more than \$1.1 million, by his own account.

He wants tens of millions more to complete the project, but some are questioning where the money is going-and whether the movie dream will ever be

The Gesundheit! Institute, a healthcare reform movement founded by Adams more than 20 years ago, sits on 310 acres Adams bought on Droop

There is a 6,500-square-foot workshop, a half-built Russian-style dacha, a two-hole outhouse and a cottage with attached greenhouse.

The cottage has a fax machine, a computer and three phone lines. The walls are unfinished planks. Heat comes from a wood-fired stove.

There are no patients, just two staffers who answer an endless stream of calls and letters from people suddenly enchanted with the concept of free health care after seeing "Patch Adams," which stars Williams as a maverick medical student who espouses the heal-

ing power of humor and compassion. Adams insists that \$25 million from now, a hospital will stand.

"It's like the end of most Frank Capra movies: We're going to get the girl, get the business and ride into the sunset," he said from his home in Arlington, Va.

Others do not share his conviction. Susan Cafoncelli, a Charleston, W.Va., nurse, grew disenchanted with Adams after a 1997 visit.

"He is a great storyteller. He uses it to manipulate people," she said.

Adams dreams of a 40-bed, full-service hospital where people are emotionally, physically and spiritually healed through friendship, humor and holistic techniques.

Gesundheit! staff member Jon Luchs, who has lived in Hillsboro for six months, remains a believer.

"There's a tendency to become unhappy when the ideal isn't realized or it becomes apparent it's going to take work," he said.

"Dissenters are often loud, even if there are only a few of them."

Jef Harris, an herb-store owner who lives near Hillsboro, is among the dissenters. He has never met Adams but says financial concerns kept him from joining Gesundheit!.

"Where's this money going? The staff could not answer that question," Harris said. "He's taken people's money for years and done nothing.

Adams dismisses Harris as some one who couldn't establish a business relationship with Gesundheit!.

"We are unbelievably wholesome. We are wacky. And not everyone who has come to us has loved us. But 750,000 people love us," he said of his support-

In his 1993 book, "Gesundheit!," Adams said he needed \$5 million for construction and \$1.5 million a year for operating costs. Today he wants \$50 million-half for construction and half for operating expenses.

"The fund-raising goal has changed as the plan for the hospital has evolved," Adams said. "The first plan was in-

Adams, 53, is a lean 6 feet 4 inches with long gray hair and a handlebar mustache

He dresses in colorful oversized clothing and clown shoes and behaves outrageously just to get a laugh.

On film and in life, he rails against the medical establishment as being devoid of humanity and driven by greed.

But since the movie's release, money has become important to Gesund-

A web site that once focused on Adams' mission now begs for money: "Don't wait, donate!" and "Put your money where your nose is."

For \$10, donors get a red rubber nose. For \$25, they get a whoopee cushion. And for \$75, they get a free copy of Adams' 200-page book.

Adams commands lecture fees as high as \$20,000. Universal Studios has donated \$500,000.



Robin Williams stars as Dr. Hunter D. "Patch" Adams in the Universal Studios film about the doctor who belie laughter is the best medicine.

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