

Mercy leader learned ideals at a young age

By [JIM LEUTE](#) ([Contact](#)) Thursday, Jan. 19, 2012

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The terrazzo floor of the minor seminary was hard on young Javon Bea's knees, but the hours he spent kneeling on it were a painful consequence of doing what he thought was right.

He'd asked a roommate for toothpaste because neither he nor his family could afford the expense associated with improper dental hygiene. But he'd done so after evening prayers, when silence was the mandate at the boarding school for teenage boys interested in becoming priests.

Doing the right thing—no matter the consequence, resistance or controversy—has been the guiding principle for Bea since he left the seminary in the 1970s and charted a course through the health care industry that landed him in Janesville in 1989.

Bea, president and chief executive officer of Mercy Health System, talked about his journey Wednesday as the featured presenter at "Breakfast of Champions," an annual fundraiser for the UW-Rock County Foundation.

Bea grew up in Rockford in a family that included five brothers and six sisters. His father was a printer for the Rockford newspaper, a profession that hardly paid well enough to support a family of 14.

"Money was hard to come by, and I learned early on that I would have to work," he said.

He took on a paper route, and then added two more. A lawn service business followed, and the young Bea employed friends to help. Eventually, he landed a job in the housekeeping department at a Rockford hospital and earned an undergraduate degree from Northern Illinois University, the only one of his siblings to earn a college degree.

Bea earned a master's degree in hospital and healthcare administration from the University of Minnesota, and his career involves stops at the Mayo Medical Center in Rochester, Minn.; the Virginia Mason Hospital/Mason Clinic in Seattle, Wash., and the Daughters of Charity National Health System-Providence Hospital in Southfield, Mich.

Since arriving in Janesville in 1989, Bea has transformed the standalone Mercy Hospital into a system that today includes three hospitals and 68 clinics in 26 communities in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

Employment has grown from a few hundred to about 4,200, including 386 doctors. Gross revenues have increased from \$33 million to more than \$1 billion.

But it didn't come easy, he said.

"A lot of people didn't understand it at the time, but Mercy was in trouble, struggling to meet its payroll," Bea said.

His first order of business was to integrate the hospital, primarily by employing the doctors who actually practiced there. He also wanted to grow Mercy through specialty care clinics.

"The doctors were just fine working under a physician-governed authority, but they weren't wild about working for a non-physician, volunteer board of directors at the hospital," he said. "Hiring physicians was extremely controversial in the community ... but the goal was to bring the best care to the community so people wouldn't have to leave."

Bea said he's never been one to shy away from the results of his decisions.

He faced a similar uproar in 1990 when he decided to close Mercy's intensive care unit to doctors who were not properly credentialed to practice there. Bea said the move came after a primary care physician improperly intubated an ICU patient with "tragic" results.

Controversy and resistance followed the closure to the point that physicians sued Bea, arguing that he was unjust in stripping their ICU privileges.

But it was the right thing to do, he said, stressing that primary care doctors did not belong in the highly specialized unit.

Ten years later, what Bea had done with his ICU became a top priority for the industry.

It's another example, he said, of his conviction and faith germinated at a very young age.

"For me, the secret in life has always been to listen more than you talk, and always do the next right thing no matter how painful the consequences or resistance," he said.

Podcast Episode



WCLO's Stan Stricker reports on Javon Bea's revealing speech to supporters of the UW-Rock County Foundation

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Photo



Javon R. Bea