The second-youngest of 12 children, Javon Bea grew up on the far west side of Rockford in a small three-bedroom home with one bathroom. He shared one bedroom with his five brothers. “We slept on three sets of bunk beds,” he says. “It was kind of like growing up in an army barracks.”

His mother cared for the children while his father worked as a type operator for the local newspaper, never making more than $12,000 per year. Javon knew that if he wanted any extras, like treats or new clothes, he needed to earn the money himself.
“One summer, when I was 8 years old, I wanted to buy a popsicle from the ice cream man who was pedaling down the street with a freezer on the front of his bike,” says Javon. “I remember running to my mother to ask her for a nickel to buy a popsicle, but she didn’t even have a nickel to give me. That day I learned an important lesson: If I wanted anything beyond a bed, basic food and some hand-me-down clothes, I was going to have to earn it myself.”

Several weeks later, he asked his elderly next-door neighbor if she needed help working in her yard. She agreed, and he spent the entire day pulling weeds, raking, and cleaning up her lawn. At the end of the day, she gave him a $5 bill — and he was awestruck. “That really showed me the value of hard work,” he says now. By the time Javon was 10, he had managed to obtain his own paper route. By age 12, he had three different paper routes and two other boys working for him. “Those paper routes were a very good education for me,” he says. “It was like I was running a little business, and it allowed me to earn enough money to buy a VW Bug when I turned 16.”

At that time, he was a student at Auburn High School in Rockford, where he took part in a work-study program. He attended classes at Auburn in the morning, then mopped floors in the radiology and physical therapy departments at Rockford Memorial Hospital in the afternoons. Eventually, he landed a job working as a physical therapy technician. But his drive to get ahead didn’t stop there. “When I would finish my shift at Rockford Memorial Hospital, I would go straight to the Jewel grocery store, where my job from 6 to 10 pm every evening was to unload a semi freezer truck,” he says. “Four nights a week, I would also go from the grocery store to Zhakey’s, where I would make pizza and clean up the restaurant until 1 in the morning. The next day, I would be back in class at Auburn by 7 am.”

After receiving a scholarship from the Rockford Memorial Auxiliary, he attended Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. He received his bachelor’s degree from NIU and was one of just 20 students nationwide to be accepted into a prestigious, tuition-free, two-year physical therapy program at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The summer before he left Rockford, he met his wife, Vita, an X-ray technologist at Rockford Memorial Hospital. They were married eight weeks later. Today, they have six children and 10 grandchildren.

Javon started his own paper route when he was 10 years old. He became President and CEO of Mercy Hospital in Janesville, Wisconsin, in 1989. Javon (standing in front of his father) was the second-youngest of 12 children. Mercyhealth Hospital and Trauma Center in Janesville underwent a renovation and expansion in 2011. Mercy Sports Medicine Center in Janesville underwent a renovation and expansion in 1992.
Just before he graduated from the physical therapy program, Javon was walking home near Saint Marys Hospital in Rochester when he saw a nun struggling in her garden. He offered to help her and spent several hours with her, during which time he shared his goal of becoming a health care administrator.

“Several days after helping the nun in the garden, my supervisor told me the hospital CEO wanted to see me,” he says. “I was scared, not knowing what I had done wrong. I found my way to the CEO’s office, and there behind the desk was this little nun I had helped in the garden.” Sister Gervais was the president of Saint Marys Hospital, the largest hospital in the country at the time with the Mayo Clinic. She offered him a one-year administrative intern position before he went on to attend the University of Minnesota’s Master of Healthcare Administration program.

RISING TO THE TOP
Javon continued to be a standout through graduate school, and was eventually offered one of three vice president positions at Saint Marys Hospital with the Mayo Clinic, under the leadership of Sister Gervais. “My wife says, I still remember you had this wide-eyed, excited look on your face,” he says. “To be 26 years old and offered one of three vice president jobs at Saint Marys Hospital with the Mayo Clinic, where the people reporting to me were going to be twice my age — that was just unheard of.”

Javon was at Saint Marys Hospital with the Mayo Clinic for 10 years, and then joined the largest health system in the country at the time, the Daughters of Charity National Health System, as chief operating officer of Providence Hospital in Michigan. But he and Vita never felt at home in Michigan. When he was asked to serve as the President and CEO of the west coast division of the Daughters of Charity Health System, he instead chose the opportunity to become President and CEO of Mercy Hospital in Janesville, Wisconsin, to be closer to family. “When I first came on board, there was more square footage in the hospital than there were patients,” he says. “People in the area felt that if you were really sick, you would just travel elsewhere rather than go to Mercy Hospital.”

He set about changing the model of health care to a vertically integrated system. At the time, there hadn’t been a new physician on the hospital staff in four years — the physicians who were already in town preferred to keep it that way so their services would remain in demand. There were no specialists available, so Javon hired plastic surgeons, neurosurgeons, oncologists and more, while simultaneously building primary care clinics across the region.

“The first five years were very difficult, because some of the other physicians in town were upset that I was changing the status quo by employing physicians,” he says. “But I knew it would ultimately lead to better, more coordinated patient care, because our employed physicians could concentrate on doing what they do best — caring for patients — while the health system focused on handling the behind-the-scenes operational support — scheduling, payroll, human resources, etc. My goal all along was to bring needed primary and specialty care services close to home to communities that have unmet health care needs.”

The system’s growth has been tremendous. It expanded into northern Illinois and, three years ago, merged with Rockford Health System — which meant Javon was now President and CEO of the neighborhood hospital where he got his start mopping floors. He had truly come full circle, despite starting from the most humble of roots. “It is so good to be back home,” he says. “Rockford has always held a very special place in my heart, and I am excited to keep improving the quality of care, expanding services, and to have recruited new specialists that have never been in Rockford before to serve residents throughout the greater Rockford region and beyond. I know this is where I belong.”

Members of Mercyhealth’s Regional Community Board, celebrate the placing of the final beam at the Riverside Campus.

Mercyhealth Cherry Valley opened in September 2016.

Mercyhealth broke ground on its Riverside campus in 2016.

The Orthopedic Center of Excellence opened in September 2017.

To hear more about Javon’s story, visit JavonBeaStory.org.