

Taking the Reins at Bon Secours Hampton Roads

INTERVIEW BY BRENDA H. WELCH | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN M. FREER

Bon Secours Health System marked a milestone last January when it celebrated its 25th anniversary—honoring the time when the Sisters of Bon Secours, an international congregation of Catholic women, realized their mission to establish a faith-based health care system.

But local employees barely had time to tip their collective hat toward their parent organization before they were making news of their own.

A media storm gathered over Bon Secours DePaul Medical Center, located in Norfolk, after city officials publicly withdrew support for the health system's plan to reorganize the facility. Bon Secours representatives cited financial troubles as the genesis for a proposal that would have called for a reduction in beds—from 238 to 64. City of Norfolk representatives blanched at the idea, arguing that downsizing to 64 beds would be a disservice to the community. Both sides seemed unwilling to budge.

As the public relations winds howled on both sides, hope for a truce finally came in July when local headlines announced that Michael Kerner, the recently hired chief executive officer of Bon Secours Hampton Roads, was "...open to talk about DePaul."

A little more than a month later, the waters calmed after a press conference at DePaul Medical Center, when Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim and Kerner shook hands and signed an agreement of reorganization that appeased both sides.

Since then, Bon Secours Hampton Roads has made headlines that have nothing to do with its amount of beds but instead focus on the medical advancements the health system is bringing to the community.

Health Journal spoke with Kerner about leaving a previous position in Richmond for Hampton Roads, his commitment to leading a health ministry based on strong Catholic faith, and running marathons (that's right—plural).

MICHAEL KERNER



HJ: What has surprised you in your new role as chief executive?

MK: I didn't realize the extent of the types of services that we offer throughout Hampton Roads. Bon Secours offers an impressive, comprehensive approach to providing those services, whether it's patient care, hospice care—you name it. I was also pleasantly surprised that everyone I meet who works for Bon Secours Hampton Roads really wants our ministry to grow so we can reach and help more people in the community.

HJ: What have been your biggest professional challenges so far?

MK: My biggest challenges have been the organization's biggest challenges, which include recruiting and retaining physicians, nurses, and all other staff, especially in our specialty areas—intensive care units, emergency departments and operation rooms. Other challenges include improving productivity, efficiency and operations.

HJ: What about the personal challenges of relocating?

MK: My wife and I have both done a good job of handling the personal challenge of leaving friends and family to come to a new environment to live and work. Our two

daughters are in college now, so that alone has been a life change for us. Personally, I have the challenge of learning a new market. Hampton Roads is so large and diverse. It is just going to take a bit of time for me to learn all of those different aspects of the community that Bon Secours Hampton Roads serves.

HJ: What achievements have you experienced since taking on this job?

MK: My number one moment has been receiving the support of Norfolk's mayor for DePaul Medical Center replacement proposal. It is a positive, both for Norfolk and for Bon Secours. Also, I am growing professionally because I am meeting the challenge of managing multiple facilities.

HJ: What quality do you value most in others?

MK: Integrity. The integrity to do what you say you are going to do...to stand up for something that may not be a popular route to take.

HJ: When you aren't at work, what are you typically doing?

MK: I do a fair amount of reading—mostly historical fiction or history in general. But mostly, if I am not sleeping or spending time with my wife or daughters (when they

are home from college), I'm probably running. I've been running for exercise and for my mental sanity since high school.

HJ: Are you a morning person or a night owl?

MK: I am a morning person. I enjoy being up early doing whatever. I also run in the morning. The amount I run depends on whether I am training for a marathon, but typically, I run seven to eight miles a day during the week. On Saturday I may run 15 to 20 miles, and Sunday about 10 miles.

HJ: What are you really good at that you enjoy doing?

MK: I enjoy fixing things—but I wouldn't go as far as to say I'm 'good' at it. I can do electric work, basic carpentry, fixing sheetrock, that sort of thing. When I was younger I worked construction, so that is where I learned most of those skills. When I had a larger yard, I enjoyed landscaping as well.

HJ: What would readers be surprised to know about you?

MK: I've run 15 marathons since 1979, including three Boston Marathons—in 1980, 2004 and 2006. I ran my best time when I was 27 years old—two hours and 26 minutes. ■

Name: Michael Kerner

Hometown: Richmond, Va.

Family (spouse, children): Wife, Helen; daughters, Leah and Anna

Education: Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology, University of Virginia; Master's degree in Health Administration, Virginia Commonwealth University

Professional affiliations: American College of Healthcare Executives

Stress reliever: Running