

Hofius: Perham's humble head of health

This is the fourth in a monthly series highlighting the extraordinary people who bring life to East Otter Tail Country communities.

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Chuck Hofius: Perham's humble head of health care

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When Chuck Hofius found out he was selected as one of this newspaper's Extraordinary People, his reaction was one of slightly embarrassed modesty – and deference to others.

Not one to brag about his own work, the Perham Health and Living CEO immediately began owing the hospital's accomplishments to "the extraordinary team of individuals" who work alongside him.

"I get too much of the credit," he said. "I'm just one cog in the wheel."

Yet that cog is an important one. As the self-described "coach" of 460 employees and counting, and the man behind the overall vision of health care in Perham, Hofius has led a great deal of growth and change in the 15 years he's been here – positively impacting not only the hospital, but the community as a whole.

In 2001, just a few years after Hofius took over as CEO, the hospital was reporting record revenues – nearly 60 percent higher than revenues reported in the late '90s.

Under Hofius' tenure, the Perham nursing home has grown to include home care and an independent senior living facility; it also pioneered a new patient-centered model of care that has become a model for nursing homes across the country. The hospital, too, transformed its model of care to one that is patient- and family-centered. In addition, a new clinic opened in Otter-tail, joining two others in Perham and New York Mills.

Then, of course, there's the new Perham Health – a sleek 120,000-square-foot, \$38 million facility that is the

biggest project to ever hit town. More than five years in the making, the new hospital, clinic and pharmacy opened its doors last month, to rave reviews.

But Hofius doesn't like to take the credit for this. In addition to "all the great people" at the hospital and in the community, he attributes Perham Health's growth and change to that of the larger community – and industrial and business growth, in particular. That, combined with an aging population, he said, has increased the health care needs of the community.

But the growth of the area has certainly been exciting, he said, and it's a big part of what's kept him here over the years: "It's been too fun to leave!"

Well, that and the golfing, pontooning, canoeing and hunting opportunities that are so plentiful in the Perham area. Hofius is an avid outdoorsman.

He said he also likes the town's progressiveness, and has built meaningful relationships with a lot of friends and coworkers here.

His family is another big factor – a father of three, Hofius described Perham as, "a great place to raise kids."

"I love Perham," he said genuinely. "I love the lakes area."

So much so that, after taking a new position in the Twin Cities a few years ago, he made a quick U-turn right back to Perham within two weeks. He admitted then that his heart just wasn't in the new job, or the new city – all he could think about was coming back "home." The hospital board unanimously reinstated him, stating that his leadership was in the best interest of the hospital.

"He's a solid leader," said Jim Rieber, Director of Information Systems and Technology for Perham Health. "I

can summarize it like this: You don't work for Chuck, you work with Chuck."

Rieber has been working with Hofius for the last 15 years.

"He lives every day to put the staff and patients first," Rieber said. He doesn't develop managers, he develops leaders. The whole philosophy he instills is that we do it right and we do it better than anyone else – and we do that through our people. He's extremely committed and dedicated to the organization."

Bonnie Johnson, who has worked at the hospital for 41 years and is the Director of Patient Services, also had good things to say about Hofius.

"He is visionary. I think that he has made a strong connection with the community, so that the hospital, the nursing home... we all are seen as a part of the community," she said. "He expects the leaders within the organization to contribute to the wellbeing of the community, to be partners in different community organizations."

Hofius is actively involved in local groups. He's a 15-year member of the Perham Rotary, and is involved with the Perham Chamber. He used to be even more involved, he said, but in recent years has devoted a fair amount of his time to state organizations. He is currently the Director at Large for Aging Services of Minnesota, and is a member of the Minnesota Hospital Association.

These involvements have made Hofius "the voice of small, rural healthcare systems within the larger state organizations," Johnson said.

Getting to the good place Perham Health is in today hasn't come without its challenges. Hofius said finances have posed, and continue to pose, the biggest threat to

health care today. He explained that as government programs like Medicare and Medicaid are scaled back, hospitals and nursing homes receive less reimbursements – and that’s while striving to provide more services.

Money is an especially difficult issue in Minnesota, he said, which is one of just two states in the nation (North Dakota is the other) where hospitals can only charge patients as much as the state is willing to pay.

To survive health care reform, Hofius said, hospitals will need to be a part of some larger system. For Perham Health, he added, “Sanford’s a great partner for that.”

Not that money is the only issue. It’s generally difficult to find physicians and other trained health care specialists who are interested in working at a rural hospital, Hofius said. This is a challenge he’s faced in the past, but for now, the new facility in Perham has temporarily abated this problem (state-of-the-art working conditions have been attracting a lot of applicants for open positions recently).

With the big move to the new hospital now behind him, Hofius is focusing his attention on settling into – and growing into – the new space. Already, he said, the pharmacy alone has grown by 30 percent.

“It’s going very well,” he said of life at the new hospital. “It’s fun to see a building work the way you designed it to work.”

Hofius is also involved with efforts to fill up the empty space at the former hospital, looking into different leasing options and other possibilities.

In the future, Hofius said the hospital will continue to provide new services, and seek out new physicians: “We want to be a one-stop

entry into the health care system.” The senior services offered through Perham Health will also grow over the next five years.

In addition, the hospital will be focusing more on prevention and wellness in the years to come, educating patients on how to stay healthier and avoid hospital visits when they can. In line with this, the pharmacy is starting a new program called Medication Management, where the pharmacists sit down with patients to discuss the cost, necessity, and mixing of their meds.

So while another big construction project like the new hospital is not expected anytime in the near future, the growth that has become synonymous with Perham Health is not slowing down.

Marie Nitke/FOCUS

Perham Health and Living CEO Chuck Hofius on the second-floor walkway above the atrium inside the new hospital.