

Unity Hospital President Rickie Ressler to retire

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by Elyse Kaner

Staff Writer

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Rickie Ressler, president of Unity Hospital in Fridley, will retire in early February 2010.

Rickie Ressler, president of the Fridley hospital since 2005, will retire the first part of February 2010.

"I'm looking forward to new ways to serve the community and people," she said in an interview with ABC Newspapers.

Also, the Blaine resident relishes the idea of spending more time with her five grandchildren.

Ressler, a strong advocate for patients, has made great strides in her four-year tenure of leading the hospital.

Among her many projects she led at the hospital are: a renovated and expanded emergency room, a newly opened geriatric psychiatric unit, a renovated lobby, pediatric unit and a patient substance abuse unit.

The hospital twice has received the Center of Excellence Award for Bariatrics, it has been acknowledged as having the highest level of cancer center accreditation with commendation, and Unity is now the fifth largest emergency room in terms of patient volume in the Twin Cities, according to Ressler.

Also, on Ressler's watch the hospital earned its Trauma Center Certification. In 2006, Unity implemented electronic medical records, streamlining immediate availability of patient data to health care providers to give them insight into the total medical picture.

In a few weeks, Unity is set to break ground for The Virginia Piper Institute, a comprehensive cancer services center.

That's not to mention the 40-plot community garden Ressler helped start last year at the southwest corner of Unity's campus with Rosemary Essler, chairwoman of the North Suburban Hospital District.

"She understands the inner workings of the corporate situation," Essler said.

"She made it her business to understand what the health care needs in the community were. She was able to bring those two together."

Fridley Mayor Scott Lund credits Ressler with being a great communicator, one who has kept Fridley and neighboring cities involved and informed about hospital improvements, expansions and a proposal for the building of the new oncology center.

“She was always looking for information from the cities on how they (Unity) might improve their services to the communities that they serve,” he said.

Nursing background

Ressler was born in Minneapolis and attended Bloomington Public Schools. She graduated from the Hennepin County General Hospital School of Nursing, University of Minnesota, where she received her bachelor’s degree in nursing.

She worked as a nurse for two years at Hennepin County General Hospital (now HCMC).

Late mothers words

“As long as I can remember, when you were a child, you always were going to be a nurse,” she said. “You never were going to be anything else.”

Ressler was most likely bound for a life of service even before she set out for a higher education.

It may have sprung from her taking care of her paper and other dolls as a child when they were sick. Or that she was the oldest of five children.

But, perhaps, what shaped Ressler’s career choice the most was growing up in the era of President John F. Kennedy.

She was motivated by his push to serve the country, take risks and his introducing the Peace Corps to America under his leadership.

Before coming to Unity, Ressler led the merging leadership teams of both Mercy and Unity hospitals, she served as executive vice president of Allina’s Regional Hospitals and Specialty Operations for six years.

She has also served in administrative leadership positions and provided patient care at several Allina Hospitals, including River Falls Hospital in Wisconsin, New Ulm Medical Center, United Hospital, the former Eitel Hospital and Abbott Northwestern hospitals in Minneapolis. She served as executive vice president for all Allina regional hospitals.

In the early years of her career, she managed to balance caring for her family, working and attending school.

She’s patient-focused

Dr. John J. Stoltenberg, vice president of medical affairs at Unity, describes Ressler as even-keeled, patient-focused and tirelessly upbeat. Also, she is able to see both sides of a disagreement and good at helping people reach middle ground, he said.

“She put Unity on its own track and lead it on a very good way,” Stoltenberg said.

Ressler’s colleague and friend of 13 years Tom O’Connor, president of Mercy Hospital, said he is sad to see her leave.

"This is a tumultuous time in health care," O'Connor said. "People look to their leaders. She's helped people through difficult times."

Ressler has improved the quality of service to patients and employee engagement, he said.

When Ressler came to the organization 35 percent of the workers in a survey said they felt part of the system. Eighteen months later the number increased to 60 percent.

"It was just a dramatic increase," he said. "She cares about the issues of the employees – that they are informed."

She'll continue to serve

Ressler says she'll miss the people the most when she leaves. The Hospital District Board Members, leaders, managers, physicians and nursing staff at Unity.

"I'm not sure there's a lot I won't miss," she said.

Ressler is married to her husband John. They have three adult children; Sean of River Falls, Wis.; Vance of St. Cloud; and Kyle of Milwaukee, Wis.

When she retires, she plans to regroup and serve in another community capacity, perhaps, similar to her earlier years when she served as a Cub Scout leader or chairwoman of the planning committee when she lived in Cottage Grove.

As for her legacy, Ressler hopes people will remember her as being honest and committed to delivering the best care possible, for serving patients and leading an organization where physicians and caregivers can be successful.

She has received much joy from her work, she says, making a difference in peoples' lives.

"There's a lot to be said about it being called a calling," Ressler said of working in patient care and health services.

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