

BUSINESS PROFILE

Early life-lessons shaped Lee Memorial's Jim Nathan

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Lee County Health System President and CEO Jim Nathan became comfortable with hospitals early. His father was "a professional patient," Nathan said, a man who endured a cruel variety of diseases including tuberculosis, emphysema and diabetes. When he was four years old, his parents sold the motel they owned in Albuquerque, N.M. and moved home to Cincinnati, Ohio, wiped out by medical bills.

"Everyday was expected to be his last," Nathan said. "He was always in and out of hospitals."

They soon moved again to upstate New York where Nathan, an only child, entered the first grade. His father was quarantined as an experimental patient in a TB sanatorium there.

Nathan lived with his mother in a 3rd floor attic nearby, he said, and took care of himself. Looking at him now, lean, nimble, cool, unreadable dark eyes, one can imagine he hasn't changed much.

"My visits with my dad were climbing a pine tree so I could wave in the window," he said. His first hospital job was in the sanatorium's gift shop. He also managed to broadcast children's stories like "Little Red Riding Hood" to patients in the sanatorium using a personal radio. He doesn't know if his father ever heard him or not, but would like to think so.

"It was sort of my own way to connect with my dad," he said.

The hospital "hacked out" pieces of his father's lungs, Nathan said, and when the TB was officially arrested, the residual of all those surgeries left him a scarred man, tube protruding from his chest.

"I can still hear the noises from that machine sucking the fluid out of his lungs," Nathan

said. So what do you do when you're broke, crippled and 49? The elder Nathan went to work selling used cars for his brother-in-law. The business became a success, and over time, it became the family business. The expectation was young Jim would follow suit.

"So much of independent used car dealers today are schlock operators," Nathan said. "Dad didn't want to get junky cars...He knew how to get a good used car."

Meanwhile, ongoing sickness continued to loom over the family.

"The house was always grey on the weekends and quiet and when he'd get up he'd call me to come help him with billing questions and paperwork," Nathan said. "I got to see that he always had time for other people, he always had humor in what he was doing, partly to overcome the pain of his illnesses."

Nathan's mother took on duties like scraping the barbs off needles and boiling syringes and the family rarely ate meals together. In high school and college, Nathan dallied in law and even spent a summer teaching horseback riding lessons, all while preparing to go into the used car business.

"Friends thought I was crazy because I had no real interest in cars," he said. "I was more interested in getting the sales and service departments to collaborate. I had this feeling that I was supposed to do something else with my life."

Nathan underwent detailed psychological testing, he said; a doctor asked him, had he ever thought about health care administration?

Three years later at a 10th anniversary high school reunion, he was provoked after becoming reacquainted with two old friends. One was finishing a medical residency at the University of Chicago and the other was using his musical knowledge to teach juvenile delin-

quents and prisoners how to love life again. They both had something he didn't have, but wanted: passion for their work.

"That night in the car on the way home, I told my wife, 'I'm going to leave the family business,'" Nathan said. "When I told my dad what I was going to do, he was devastated. He said, 'I've spent my whole life trying to get away from doctors and hospitals, and your going to do what?'"

Nathan finished school and completed a one year residency at a Jewish hospital in Cincinnati. He moved with his wife Karen to Florida in the 1970s (they have two grown sons, Adam and Zachary) and chose LMHS for specific reasons.

"I chose the one with the least job potential, and the most political problems..." he said. "I had this feeling that they would allow me to take on more responsibility."

In 1981, he was appointed to lead the growing hospital system, left in 1997 to pursue national health care reform and other interests, and returned to LMHS in the same roll in 2000. Nathan believes America's system is about to fail in ways we have not imagined.

"This nation hasn't seen anything yet," he said. "We can not pay for or deliver health care when that whole baby boom generation, which is 61, suddenly turns 65, and each year adds numbers that Medicare has never seen. We'll have this smaller, younger generation paying for this massive, older generation."

Is there a solution?



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Lee County Health System President and CEO, Jim Nathan.

"There's no single plan we can model ours after," he said. "It won't look like other countries; it will be an American version."

Nathan's leadership reflects his philosophy, which is health care for everyone, wealthy or indigent. As a business LMHS would rightly be called a monopoly, but Nathan said it is a non-profit whose goals cannot be attached to a traditional business model. In this case, competition only leeches resources, he said — time, money and energy — which may be better spent.

"It's the only way to pay for those who can't afford to pay," he said. "If your competition is all focused on profit, it messes it up."

Health care has a long way to go, but not Nathan. He already found the passion that eluded him in younger years.

"Once I made the decision (to work in health care), I never looked back," he said. "There was never a moment's regret." ■

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