A True Servant Leader

Michael D. Williams Receives the 2014 Earl M. Collier Award for Distinguished Health Care Administration

By Judy L. Marchman

Being a servant leader goes to the heart of what Michael D. Williams, FACHE, is all about. It is a philosophy he has carried with him since his days as a graduate student, and it permeates every aspect of his life, both professionally and personally.

As the founding president and CEO of Plano-based Community Hospital Corporation, Williams steadfastly has led the organization in its mission of supporting and assisting community-based hospitals while instilling a service-based culture that believes strongly in adhering to four core values: respect, integrity, stewardship and excellence.

These values can be applied to Williams himself and the service he has provided to the health care industry throughout his career. In recognition of this service, Williams has been selected as the recipient of the 2014 Earl M. Collier Award for Distinguished Health Care Administration, the Texas Hospital Association’s highest honor.
The Right Path

Born and raised in Mobile, Alabama, Williams attended the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Armed with a biology and chemistry degree, he continued on to medical school at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. But three years in, he found himself questioning his motivation for becoming a doctor and discovered that he derived more enjoyment from using his natural talents in organization and management. At the same time, he came to his faith, which remains an intrinsic part of who he is. The idea of servant leadership—of doing what God intended him to do with the skills he was given—was born out of his faith and led him on the path he has since taken.

Williams left the medical program with about 14 months left and transitioned into the hospital administration program, graduating in 1980. In his final year of graduate school, he served his residency at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas under the guidance of longtime CEO Boone Powell Sr.

“He was a patriarch among health administrators, and I was one of his last administrative residents,” Williams said, adding that Powell and his son, Boone Powell Jr., both were instrumental in helping him define his role as a servant leader, particularly in working with the medical staff.

“Mr. Powell Sr. told me that the two most important words you can say are a person’s first and last names. Addressing a person by name is so important in developing those personal relationships,” he said.

Another key lesson, this one from Powell Jr., was the importance of respect for and deference to the medical staff.

“Our job is to serve them and create an optimal environment for them to work in,” Williams said.

He took those early lessons to heart and has applied them at every point in his career. After moving up the ranks as an administrator at both Baylor and Children’s Medical Center Dallas, he was recruited in 1988 to Knoxville, Tennessee, to be senior vice president and chief operating officer of Baptist Health System of East Tennessee. Three years later, he became president and COO of Baptist Hospital of East Tennessee. In coming to Knoxville, he had joined an organization in turmoil, both financially and in market position.

“We had to build a team and reconnect the organization to its mission,” he said.

Although Williams didn’t know it at the time, his work in Knoxville was the perfect lead-in to the next step in his career.

Making a Difference

In 1997, Williams received a call from a search firm looking for someone to lead a new organization, Community Hospital Corporation. Thirteen nonprofit and community-owned health care organizations in Texas and New Mexico established CHC to preserve and protect the nonprofit status of community-based hospitals.

“Joining CHC was exciting but intimidating as well,” Williams said. “I was moving into an organization where there was essentially one person on the organizational chart—me.”

Williams was eager to be a part of such a thrilling mission, that of serving community hospitals and assisting them in overcoming their particular challenges, whether financial, organizational or marketplace-related.

“I had the support of the board, but they were looking at me to put a plan into effect to fulfill that mission. I had my moments of doubt in the early years, but I also had faith in our service to the community hospitals,” he said.

Williams and the fledgling CHC were able to put their plan to the test when the struggling Yoakum Community Hospital became the organization’s first lease in 1998. Sixteen years later, Yoakum Community Hospital has gone from a struggling facility to a thriving one, recently expanding its campus.

“If it were not for the vision and insight that Mike Williams had to build a company such as CHC, Yoakum Community Hospital would not be the facility that it is today—and that’s a fact,” Karen Barber, RN, the hospital’s CEO, said. “We are proud to be considered the project that got it all started.”
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Building Relationships

The success at Yoakum Community Hospital helped affirm CHC’s mission. Starting from the ground up, with zero revenue and zero employees, Williams has built CHC into a company with revenue of $354 million and 62 employees in the corporate office. CHC initially focused on the Southwest, but as it gained traction, it expanded its reach nationwide.

“Many community hospitals, by virtue of their locations, serve an increased number of Medicare, Medicaid and underserved populations,” Williams said. “Many of these facilities can be salvaged to continue providing a crucial role in their communities if appropriately led and directed. Preserving this first access to care in a community – that’s what we’re all about.”

Today, CHC owns or manages 20 community hospitals across the country, but the creation of the consulting arm 10 years ago really took CHC to a new level. CHC now works with hospitals in 25 states, from Georgia and North Carolina to Nebraska and Colorado. CHC also has moved into working with long-term acute-care hospitals.

“Creating relationships, what Boone Powell Sr. taught me, has been the key to success for CHC,” Williams said.

By creating strong relationships with hospital leadership, Williams and the CHC team have been better positioned to work with hospitals in correcting their course. Such was the case at the former Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center, a longtime community leader in Waco. The facility faced several complex issues, from dwindling cash flow to conflict between the medical staff and management. The board called in Williams and his team to assess the situation. One of the primary solutions was bringing in a partner, in this case, Baylor Scott & White Health, and helping effect a merger.

“Without Mike’s trusting relationship with our board, along with his strong leadership, our hospital would not be a part of the new Baylor Scott & White Health system,” said Glenn A. Robinson, FACHE, president of Baylor Scott & White Hillcrest. “The story of what Mike and the CHC team under his leadership accomplished at Hillcrest is played out over and over again with hospitals across the Southwest and now across the nation.”

Serving Others

Williams lives the servant leader philosophy both in and out of the office. He is a strong believer in sharing one’s knowledge and expertise with both fellow and future colleagues, and to that end he has served his alma mater, the University of Alabama in Birmingham School of Health Professions, in various ways, including as an adjunct professor and on the SHP Dean’s Advisory Board. He and his wife, Susan, endowed the Williams Family Scholarship in 2013 to benefit students studying health administration, and in 2014 he was named to the Distinguished Alumni list.

Professionally, Williams served as chairman of the Texas Hospital Association Board of Trustees in 2010 and is a past regent of the American College of Healthcare Executives. He also has served as a member of the American Hospital Association’s Regional Policy Board 7.

Williams and Susan, a former pediatric nurse, celebrated 32 years of marriage in December. The couple has combined their love of travel with a love of service through their global medical ministry work, which has taken them to such destinations as Kenya, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Haiti.

“What the challenges to the health care industry on a global basis, it’s easy to be overwhelmed,” Williams said. “But if you go to a small community, you can make a difference in any small way – for that community, for that village, for that child.”

At the end of the day, though, it all comes back to spending time with family, where he is happy being a proud “Papa” to his growing brood of grandchildren. His daughter, Sarah, and her husband, Jim, have four boys, including twin newborns, and live close by, having just bought their first home near the Dallas church where her parents met. His son, Spencer, who is an attorney, and his wife, Amy, live in Denver, where they have a daughter and are expecting a boy in February.

“We are abundantly blessed,” Williams said. ★