



Fall 2005

A Legacy of Healing

Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel (2005) "A Legacy of Healing," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss3/6>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

A Legacy of Healing

Like their father before them, the Rossi siblings at Hopedale Medical Complex believe that putting patients first is a practice that never goes out of style.



Dr. Lawrence Rossi (shown in center portrait) committed his life to the Hopedale Medical Complex — a tradition that his children are continuing. Above right are, from left, sons Larry, Al, Phil, Mark, and Matt. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Story by Rachel Hatch

Forty years ago, in any quiet, country town across the nation, if you were sick, you went to see someone who knew you best. It was a person who knew your entire medical history without seeing a chart — probably even delivered you. This person was your neighbor, your friend, your confidant, who knew everything about you from your aches and pains to your best bowling score. This person was the country doctor.

In these days of medical megaplexes, where familiarity with patients can be reduced to a name on a file folder or computer screen, this personal approach to medicine seems almost extinct. The trade-off is that technology and other innovations have led to more effective treatments and prevention of disease.

In rural central Illinois, physicians are exploring a third option by offering the personal approach of country doctoring in a thoroughly modern medical setting. The result is the multi-million dollar Hopedale Medical Complex (HMC) tucked away in the community of Hopedale, located in Tazewell County, less than 30 miles from Bloomington.

Built in 1955 under the leadership of Dr. Lawrence Rossi, the complex continues to thrive and grow under the guiding hands of several of Rossi's 11 children — including IWU alumnus Mark '80, who is the complex's chief operating officer and general counsel, as well as Matt '81 and Phil '83, who are both vascular surgeons and general practitioners at HMC.

Drive into Hopedale, population 1,000, on any given weekend, and what you see is pure small-town Illinois. Neighbors wave and say hello to each other. Kids laugh and play outside the elementary school. Flags wave all down Main Street, and a church seems to sit on every corner. For all its quaint virtues, Hopedale is not the kind of place where one would expect to find a large medical complex.

Most of the residents would agree that — along with a tornado that struck the town's park in 1986, and the tumultuous closure of the high school in the 1970s — the opening of HMC is the biggest thing to happen to Hopedale in its recent history. With some 250 employees, the medical complex is the community's largest employer.

Lawrence Rossi began his association with the town as a young country doctor, traveling from Pekin to Hopedale to tend patients. When the constant back and forth became too wearying, he decided to cease his rounds in Hopedale. As his sons tell it, a Hopedale farmer stopped him and asked what it would take to get him to continue seeing patients in the town. "A hospital," replied Lawrence Rossi. "Okay,"



Hopedale residents agree that the medical complex is one of the biggest things to ever happen to the town. (Above) An aerial view shows how dramatically the complex has grown over 50 years. (Photo provided by HMC)

was the farmer's unexpected reply. "How do we get one of those?"

Rossi and his wife, Lorayne, donated the land while money to build the hospital was raised by volunteers from the surrounding communities. In 1955, the 20-bed Hopedale Hospital officially opened, with Rossi serving as general practitioner, 24-hour ER doctor, obstetrician, and more. Yet even with the demands on his time, he still sought better ways to treat his patients. From his small hospital on the prairie, Lawrence Rossi pioneered new techniques and championed new medical fields. In 1958, Rossi opened the first nursing home in Illinois that was built from original plans (as opposed to converting old buildings). According to HMC literature, Rossi was also the first in Illinois to champion podiatry, the first to have an assisted living center for the elderly, and the first to open an alcoholic rehabilitation center for the elderly that received referrals even from the famous Betty Ford clinic.

"My father was the definition of a visionary," says Larry, his oldest son, who practices anesthesia at HMC.



A vintage photo of the late Lawrence Rossi shows him tending to a young patient. Rossi could have made a fortune selling Hopedale Hospital, but instead turned over its ownership to a non-profit, charitable corporation. (Photo provided by HMC)

"Whenever someone needed something, Dad didn't say, 'It's impossible,'" his brother Mark agrees. "He said, 'How can we do it?'" Behind that drive was a personal need to make things work. "You have to understand that Dad took on a lot of responsibility when he was just a kid," says Mark. When the elder Rossi was young, his father, a tavern owner, suffered a stroke, leaving him to care for his family. "It inspired him to care for others, in his amazing way."

As HMC grew under his watchful eye and care, Lawrence Rossi refused to take the role of a for-profit owner or sell the hospital to a large company — despite the fact that he would have likely grown quite wealthy in the process. As the elder Rossi recalled in an interview, later posted on the HMC Web site: "Construction of private, for-profit health facilities zoomed and we were one of the first 'on board.' However, this did not appeal to us. We decided the medical complex really should not be family owned. It was the community's hospital." Since 1961, the complex has been owned and operated by the Hopedale Medical Foundation, a not-for-profit, charitable corporation.

Expansion continued at a rapid pace: in 1964, the nursing home's size was doubled and a physical therapy wing with rehabilitation beds was opened. Additions in the 1970s included a surgery wing and operating rooms, a Medical Arts Building, and six triple apartments for the elderly. Hopedale Commons West, an assisted living facility, opened in 1994, followed by Commons East, for independent living. A new nursing home, Hillman Pavilion, opened in 2000. Lawrence Rossi died in 2001 before completion of his final dream: the Hopedale Wellness Center, a 34,000-square-foot facility that includes a gym, indoor track, three therapy pools, and a professional physical therapy staff.

At the heart of the complex is Hopedale Hospital — which the Rossi brothers pridefully point out has the same services as larger, urban hospitals, including a 24-hour emergency room; ICU; general and advanced vascular, orthopedic, and plastic/reconstructive surgery; an open MRI unit; and a new, "16-Slice" Siemens CT scanner, capable of doing full body/heart scans and virtual colonoscopies.

While HMC's facilities and reputation continued to grow, Lawrence Rossi remained obstinately committed to doing medicine his way — even as other hospitals were gobbled up into consolidations and conglomerates and attention drifted away from the patient and to the bottom line. Rossi ignored the trends in which doctors were encouraged to become specialists rather than general practitioners or to move from an intimate doctor-patient relationship in favor of seeing more patients overall. All of the Rossi doctors at HMC are general practitioners

as well as skilled specialists. The idea is that a patient can tell his problem to his doctor, who can also perform his surgery.

“I’d had my fill of the factory feeling of big hospitals,” says Matt, reflecting on his decision to join HMC. “I was missing the relationship between patient and doctor. Now it seems there are drive-by relationships between ‘healthcare providers’ and ‘clients.’ Doctors have a smaller and smaller role in the well-being of their patients. I wanted more control of my destiny.”

Although hindsight makes it clear that the destiny of almost all the Rossi children was to join in their father’s allegiance to the Hopedale Medical Complex, it wasn’t a commitment that they felt obligated to make.

“Dad never pressured us to become doctors,” says Phil. “He went out of his way to let us know we should choose our own paths. But what else would I want to do? This is what I know.”

The Rossi children were motivated to get involved in the life of their father’s hospital, in part, as a way to spend more time with him. “If you wanted to see Dad, you came here,” says Phil. “This is where Dad could be found 24 hours a day.” Being Hopedale’s only emergency room doctor added to the demands on his time.

With their father away from home so much, the children say they were raised with their mother Lorayne’s determination and energy, combined with their father’s dedication to others. “Mom held the family together,” says Mark, “and Dad held our ideals.”

Instead of feeling neglected or upstaged by the hospital, the Rossi children say they formed a natural appreciation of caring for others. “There was nothing extraordinary about helping people, Dad taught us it was part of life,” says Marietta Rossi Foellner. A 1976 Illinois Wesleyan graduate and registered nurse, Foellner recalls her elementary school days when she and her siblings ate their school lunches across the street at the nursing home. “Dad never said, ‘Help these people.’ He just pushed their wheelchairs up to our table and left. It was natural for us to help feed them and spend time with them.”

As they grew old enough to decide their own futures, the only demand that Lawrence Rossi made on his children was to make wise higher-education choices. From their father, the Rossi children say they learned to appreciate a devotion to learning. “My father was an extremely hard-working person,” says Matt, “but he had a soft spot for students of any sort. He was a student all his life, and the complex reflects that.”

The children took their father’s energy and love of learning to college with them — not that their pursuits there were altogether serious. “I had the dubious honor of being the first TKE to fall during the chariot race in years,” Mark says. “And I smoked them all during practice! The TKEs didn’t win for a long time. I think I cursed them.” It was also at Illinois Wesleyan that Mark realized he was better equipped for a career in law than medicine — making him the “the black sheep of the family,” he admits with a laugh.

For Matt, Illinois Wesleyan was actually his second choice — he transferred after visiting Mark during his freshman year at Northwestern University. “I knew Northwestern was a good school when I went there,” says Matt. But he also realized something was missing for him. “I was in all these big classes with no contact with the professor,” he says. “Mark was getting to know the faculty, even in labs. It felt more comfortable. I guess you could say it felt more like being at home.”

Phil, the youngest, followed his brothers to Illinois Wesleyan. It was an easy choice, he says. “Most kids who went to Wesleyan got into graduate school,” he says, “specifically medical school.”

Al, who attended the University of Illinois, was the first of the siblings to return to Hopedale. Soon he and his father were working together to create an ambitious vision of the complex’s future. As that vision came alive, the Rossi children gravitated back to HMC, one by one.

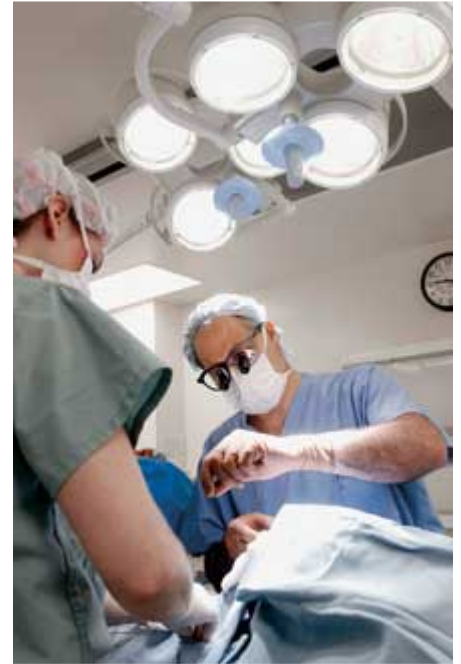
Matt was finishing his medical training in Dallas when he spoke to his father and brother Al, who shared their concept of an expanding complex that combined sophisticated medical technologies with a personal approach to patient care. Matt was hooked and moved with his wife Tracy, who was then expecting twins, and their three other children from Texas to Hopedale.

Phil, who was also in Texas, followed not long after. For Larry, the decision to return was more complicated. He was head of pediatrics at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria but decided to retrain in anesthesia so that he, too, could join the Hopedale enterprise. The Rossi daughters also heard the calling: Laura Murray is a CNRA, Lisa McLaughlin is a pharmacology doctor, and eldest daughter Cynthia Noreuil is administrator of Hopedale Commons. (Foellner is soon to follow as a counselor at HMC as soon as she finishes her master’s in pastoral counseling at Loyola University.) Mark gave up his law practice in 1984 to become the complex’s chief operating officer, joining in the dream that has now successfully transferred to second generation — and possibly a third. Matt’s son Nick ’08 and Al’s son David ’07 both spent their summers working at HMC.

“My interest is definitely in medicine,” says Nick. Like his father, Nick learned a love of the field at a young age. “I’ve pretty much been around it my whole life. Sure, my father and uncles did influence me, but my interest in medicine is my own.”

And just like his father, Nick says he feels no pressure now to return to Hopedale after he graduates, but the lure is there. “We’ll have to see where I end up, what expertise I choose,” he says. “As a doctor, HMC is a pretty ideal a place to work if patient care is really what you care about. The doctors there are also the administrators, so they know what is going on. They also know every patient, so they care about what is going on.”

Lori Musser Goffinet — a ’92 IWU School of Nursing graduate — admits that when she first worked with the Rossi brothers in surgery she found their methods a bit surprising. In most hospitals, when a patient goes into surgery, “there is a nurse who sits with them while they undergo anesthesia,” says Goffinet, who is now head of infectious control at HMC. “It’s (a nurse’s) job to comfort the patient and sit with them at the head of the (surgical) table. But not here. I learned pretty fast that seat is reserved for the surgeons. They know their patients. They are the ones who support the patients.”



IWU alumnus Mark Rossi performs surgery at the Midwest Vascular Institute, established at Hopedale in 1993. Hopedale’s unusual approach to patient care has received national publicity, including segments on *CBS Morning News* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

The Rossi siblings believe that this kind of personal care is not only good medicine, but good business. “Every hospital where I have worked no longer exists,” says Foellner of the buyouts and closings of hospitals in the 1980s and ’90s. “The only acute care facility still around is Hopedale — the one everyone thought would be gone. I’ll tell you why it’s still here. Because my father believed that the patient is the absolute focus of what he did, and my brothers still believe it.”

“This place is such an aberration,” says Matt. “It’s built on the belief that if you really care about a patient, you will work extra hard to be there for him or her in all aspects of medicine, whether it’s listening to a problem, or performing surgery. It doesn’t take five or six doctors to care for one patient.”

Like their father before them, the doctors serve multiple roles at the HMC, from heart surgery to fighting the common cold. “These guys all cover the ER at no cost,” said Mark of his brothers. “Just like dad did from day one.” The combination works. The HMC draws not just from the 20,000 residents in the surrounding communities, but also from larger cities, where Mark says people are drawn by the level of care. “What matters is the attention to detail for everyone. My father knew that. We know that. It shows,” he says.

Foellner calls it her father’s legacy. “When my father was dying, he said to me, ‘Do you know what is missing in the world? Compassion,’” says Foellner. Lawrence Rossi’s biggest hope for Hopedale Medical Complex was that it always represent an exception to that trend.

With 2005 marking the 50th anniversary of the hospital, the children’s thoughts are on the elder Dr. Rossi. “I wish you could have met him,” says Matt. “Everyone who met him loved him. You would have.” But the future is also on the minds of the Rossi siblings— just as it always was for their father. Yet even as Matt discusses possible expansions of programs and services for the complex, he insists one thing will remain the same at HMC. “We will continue to be an oasis for those who want common sense in medical care.” Spoken like a man from Hopedale, Illinois.