Healthy Neighbors

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St. Elizabeth Healthcare Celebrates 150 Years
Longtime Organization’s Hallmark Is ‘the Dedication of Its People’

As he combed through the dusty archives that detail the last 150 years of St. Elizabeth Healthcare, historian Dr. Brian Hackett came across one item that gave him pause. Tucked amid an assortment of handwritten recollections of the hospital’s early years made by the Sisters of the Poor was a simple benediction reading, “So that the new hospital may not only be an ornament for Covington, but a blessing for centuries.”

Hackett says he had to stop and take that thought in.

“It just struck me as very poignant,” he says. “That was their hope, that St. Elizabeth would be around for generations.”

Today, as St. Elizabeth Healthcare begins to celebrate its 150th anniversary, that wish is clearly being fulfilled. The healthcare organization founded with one small hospital in 1861 now has six major facilities stretching across five Northern Kentucky counties and is the area’s largest employer, with more than 6,000 associates.

In anticipation of St. Elizabeth’s sesquicentennial this year, a trio of Northern Kentucky University history professors has been researching the hospital’s history. Hackett, along with Drs. Paul Tenkotte and Rebecca Bailey, started the project last summer.

Their work has already produced an exhibit of photos and hospital artifacts that will be on display at Covington’s Behringer-Crawford Museum through January 16. (See details at bottom of next page.) They have also compiled a commemorative book celebrating the hospital’s history that will be available to the public this year.

It All Began with One Woman’s Vision

Everything starts, Tenkotte says, with one remarkable woman by the name of Henrietta Cleveland. Despite the incredible personal losses of her husband and two children, Cleveland managed to found the hospital in 1861.

“She was left alone in the world, so she dedicated her life to the poor,” he says. “She was a social activist, a mover-and-shaker in the community.

She spoke out for what she believed in, which was unusual for women of the day. She also converted to Catholicism, which as a wealthy Protestant, was just as unusual.”

Concerned with the plight of Covington’s poor, Cleveland petitioned the Diocese of Covington’s first bishop, the Most Rev. George Carrell, about the need for a hospital in Northern Kentucky to care for the less fortunate. After gaining the bishop’s approval, she enlisted the help of wealthy Cincinnati social activist Sarah Worthington King Peter to raise more than $2,000 to build the hospital.

The civic-minded pair then recruited the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor to staff the hospital and open a home for foundlings—infants who had been abandoned. With all the elements in place, the first St. Elizabeth Hospital was able to open its doors in 1861 on Seventh Street in Covington.

Since then, St. Elizabeth’s growth has remained as steady and firm-footed as its mission. For decades it grew in both quality and scope of
services from its well-known former “North Unit” location on 20th Street in Covington.

**Growth Rooted in Commitment to Mission**

From that familiar building—which so many locals call their birthplace—St. Elizabeth has extended its reach across Northern Kentucky by opening St. Elizabeth Grant in 1993, and St. Elizabeth Edgewood in 1978, and merging with the former St. Luke Hospitals in 2008.

As historians such as Tenkotte have looked back at the organization’s phenomenal growth over the years, the snapshots of St. Elizabeth’s history tell a story of an organization whose compassion and strength has nurtured the growth and health of the whole Northern Kentucky region.

Tenkotte recalls, for instance, the 1937 flood, when the Ohio River rose to nearly 30 feet above flood stage and the Licking River encircled the hospital.

“Despite their best efforts, the water flooded the hospital’s basements and put the boilers out. What do you do? You need to keep the hospital up and running.

“Their first concern was the patients, so they put up sandbags and brought in a steam shovel that powered the hospital. They improvised and just carried on,” says Tenkotte.

That dogged determination to deliver the very best care to all who need it, despite the challenges, has always been St. Elizabeth’s hallmark, regardless of the scale of the disaster or challenge.

**An ‘Amazing Legacy’**

From the devastation of the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire that killed 165 people and injured 200 more in 1977, to the countless smaller, more personal crises that so many have faced inside the hospitals’ walls over the years, St. Elizabeth’s dedicated professionals have always reached out to respond to the need.

“The main thing we want to underscore about St. Elizabeth is the dedication of its people,” Tenkotte said. “When you think of the tens of thousands of patients over the past 150 years, it becomes an awesome and amazing legacy.”

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**TAKE A CLOSER LOOK.** From the Civil War to healthcare reform and everything in between, St. Elizabeth Healthcare’s 150 years are on display through January 16 at the Behringer-Crawford Museum in Covington’s Devou Park. The exhibit is called “Here’s to Your Health: The Development of Healthcare in Northern Kentucky.” Located at 1600 Montague Road in Covington, the museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and 1 to 5 p.m. on Sundays. It is closed on Mondays. Call 859-491-4003 for information.

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St. Elizabeth Hospital’s first location, Seventh Street, Covington. From *One Hundred Twenty-Five Years: St. Elizabeth Medical Center* (1986).

The second location of St. Elizabeth Hospital, 11th Street, Covington. Courtesy of Paul A. Tenkotte, Ph.D.

Patients’ ward, circa 1935, St. Elizabeth Hospital, Covington. From *Diamond Jubilee: St. Elizabeth’s Hospital* (1935).