

A HOSPITAL INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Best Kept Secret In Our Backyard

By Ann Miller Baker

BETH HOUGHTON

Photography: Jeremy Peplow

When Moffitt Cancer Center opened to great fanfare 30 years ago, few other than those who'd midwived its birth understood the challenges that had been overcome and the courage it took to get there.

THIRTY MILES AWAY AT ALL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL IN ST. PETERSBURG, THEN-CFO AND GENERAL COUNSEL BETH HOUGHTON HAD AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE.

"We at All Children's had heard about this new cancer center that was going to be 'head and shoulders above' anything we'd seen in the state of Florida; that it was going to seek NCI Comprehensive Cancer Center status and would focus on research, teaching and patient care. And we said, 'We get that! We understand!'" Houghton adds with a chuckle, "We might have been the only health care providers who were excited about it."

She says All Children's Hospital, a regional provider devoted to pediatric specialty care, was uniquely positioned to understand the courage it took "because we were fighting some of the same battles, trying to explain to people that in order to have the best, most cost-effective care in a specialty area like pediatrics or cancer, it really makes sense to centralize efforts on a regional basis.

"The folks at local community hospitals were saying, 'We take care of every pediatric patient or every cancer patient in our three ZIP codes. We're fine.' People didn't understand what it means to have an MD Anderson Cancer Center or a Boston Children's Hospital — a specialty hospital that is world-class - in your own backyard."

Fast-forward to 2000, and it's clear why Houghton was tapped to chair Moffitt's Hospital Board. An attorney and certified public accountant with specialty health care experience and understanding of the Tampa/St. Petersburg market, Houghton had developed long-standing relationships with Moffitt's leaders.

"I respected the institution and I wanted to continue to be involved with health care after I left All Children's," she explains, "but I had really high standards. I wanted to be involved with an organization of Moffitt caliber, with the clear vision and commitment to excellence in every aspect of the institution. And they sought me out because they thought I had something to bring to the table, not because I might write a check, but for knowledge and skills."

KEEPING A PATIENT-CARE FOCUS

In her 16 years as Hospital Board chair, Houghton's role has been to keep the focus on patient care: its safety, quality and satisfaction. A resident of St. Petersburg, she's not the only board member with a commute. Others come from Sarasota and The Villages two hours north of Tampa — a reflection, Houghton says, of Moffitt's standing as a regional asset. Together, these 14 professionals and business leaders bring their particular insights to the table with hospital administration and management, engaging in discussions that continually improve the institution.

Houghton says it's gratifying to see Moffitt's stature grow. "To be now recognized by U.S. News & World Report as the No. 6 cancer center in the country? That's beyond amazing."

But not a surprise, she says, when you've watched Moffitt innovate on the advancing edge of cancer care and research. "In recent years in the general press, we've been hearing more about personalized medicine and genomics," Houghton notes, "why a particular regimen of chemotherapy might work for me but wouldn't work for you for the same disease, and that we can now begin to predict that. Well, Moffitt leadership was talking about that 10 years ago, starting Total Cancer Care® long before you were hearing about it any place else. So there really has been a vision and an entrepreneurial spirit ... and because we're as young as we are, the ability to do things that haven't been done before. That is an evolution that's been amazing to watch."

As to where that evolution will lead in Moffitt's next 30 years, Houghton says she'll leave the predictions to those with greater expertise. "We have some incredible initiatives that show great promise. But it takes money to move them down the road." She says NIH funding and similar competitive grants won't be enough. "The fact is, funds at that level have really stagnated and in some cases gone down over the last five to 10 years. As much as we think we're fighting cancer, we can only hope that

Vice President Biden's 'Moonshot' will change that. These are expensive enterprises to undertake.

"We were initially funded by the state of Florida and continue to receive state funding that supports our research and teaching roles. I think it's important for Florida to double down and increase that funding. We have more than proven that we are good stewards of those funds, that we've used them to make a huge difference in the quality of life for all Floridians."

PHILANTHROPIC DOLLARS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

As executive director of the St. Petersburg Free Clinic, with its food bank, shelters and health care services for the underserved, Houghton also appreciates the power of philanthropy.

"Moffitt deserves philanthropic support because of the quality of work that it does and the efficiency with which it does it. Those of us who make a choice to be generous philanthropically do so because we want those dollars to be used well and to make a difference in the lives of people we care about and the lives of people we may never know. Moffitt does that. And that's what I want to invest my philanthropic dollars in."

She's also keenly aware of the trust invested in her to keep Moffitt moving forward.

"I'm gratified by people like Lee Moffitt having faith in me personally, to want me to be one of those people to take the baton and continue the mission. That's humbling to me."

"He had a vision. He saw something that I doubt but a handful of other people in the state even saw: that opportunity and that need in this very populous state to have a real NCI Comprehensive Cancer Center. What Lee did initially is amazing and how he did it was amazing. But I'm even more amazed that, 30 years later, he is just as energetic, just as passionate."

And just as committed to his philosophy that each and every individual can make a difference. It's a philosophy Houghton shares.

"I think every one of us can make a difference. We have different skills. We have different capabilities. We have different pocketbooks. But every dollar, every word shared makes a difference. There are a lot of best kept secrets in the Tampa Bay area. Moffitt is, to some extent, one of those. And we need to keep telling our story more broadly and more effectively, so that folks know what a difference it makes and that they can invest in that difference right here in their own backyard." 