



Tom Martin – blue collar work ethic



Look closely at the collar. At first glance it's white, but when you get to know Lincoln Hospital Administrator Tom Martin, that collar begins to turn blue.

"My brother and I were the first in our family to go to college," he says of his upbringing. Joliet, Illinois was a strictly blue collar town with mines, steel mills and a rock quarry.

"My father drove a forklift, loaded boxes, worked in munitions plants and was a union member. My mother was a store manager. I learned to swim and ski on a flooded open coal mine," he recalls with a smile. But football changed everything.

"I was a flankerback — a speedster," he laughs of his route to college. "I held the record for yardage and touchdowns in the Chicago area which got me a scholarship."

That scholarship led to a degree in business and jobs for major corporations across the U.S. including Fortune 500ers Masonite and Pepsico.

"Pepsico sent me to manage a facility in California," he grimaces. He packed up his family, which included wife Kate, his high school sweetheart, and young son T.J. and went. "We absolutely hated it."

As Kate was a nurse, she could work anywhere. The Martins looked at a map and headed for the Pacific Northwest. Traveling the area, they found Spokane and called it home. They now reside in Reardan.

"It reminded us of Illinois with four seasons, hard working people and family values." Still, working only to turn the bottom line didn't sit well with Tom. "I wanted my life to have more direct impact on people, not just make money for the shareholders."

Eventually, Tom earned a degree in Health Services Administration from Whitworth and set about making that difference in people's lives.

"I started out by setting up an in-patient psychiatric treatment center for teens in Spokane. It was a locked facility." When that was accomplished, Tom found he wanted more responsibility.

"That's when I came to Lincoln Hospital in 1987."

At that time, Lincoln Hospital had less than 100 employees working LTC and Acute Care. Over the next 10 years, Tom changed the management structure and started expanding services.

"It was an exciting time," he smiles. "Still is." Looking back, Tom says his greatest challenges were bringing in new technology such as the CT scanner, mammography unit and upgraded surgical equipment. "We needed these things to attract visiting specialists to do procedures here." These services were well received and Lincoln Hospital began to grow.

That's what made it such a hard decision to leave in 1997.

"I didn't apply for the position. INHS came to talk to me about being an Executive Director in charge of coordinating all their activities. It was flattering that I got the job, but what I found was they didn't need me specifically." Tom stayed only a short while and basically, talked himself out of a job. "I told them what they really needed and it wasn't me."

He left in good standing and went to work at Holy Family as a Vice President. There just over a year, he got a call from the Lincoln Hospital Board of Directors. "They needed an administrator and asked if I would look over the situation they were dealing with. I looked at it and saw a resolution."

He also saw a challenge — the challenge of running a rural healthcare system.

"Taking this hospital and changing it in positive ways was a big motivator for me. I wanted to contribute in a significant way so I came back."

Today, Lincoln Hospital has expanded services tremendously, cuts over 250 paychecks, has three medical clinics and an assisted living center in Wilbur. "We only had three doctors and a PA back in 1987. Today, we have 10 providers. We didn't have any female providers back then," he laughs of the change. "Today we have four. We've accomplished a lot and it's all due to building relationships."

Tom says his job as administrator is just that. "It's about relationships, pure and simple. I'm here to make sure the public's interests are served and that our staff works together, has a purpose and is respected — that they receive justice."

The three pillars of this organization mean a lot to Tom — Respect, Collaboration and Excellence. "Respect is number one," he says, noting every staff member is monumentally important. "Respect means listening to ideas, complaints and suggestions. This leads right into collaboration. We can, and very often are, innovators in rural health when we work together to accomplish a goal." And that goal, he says, should always be excellence. "It's the natural end result."

It also means long hours and hard work. "There are no limits. Only the ones we place on ourselves." And no collars either.