The powers that heal

In a state replete with the brightest and most innovative minds in medicine, these 14 pioneering caregivers, technologists and employers represent the best of what Massachusetts has to offer.
A local pioneer's success has reshaped May Institute, approaches to autistic care

In turning May Institute around, Christian set standard

BY ROBERT CELASCHI

When Walter Christian took over as president and CEO of the May Institute in 1979, the small school had 17 autistic children and revenue of $250,000.

It's 30 years later, and the world is a very different place.

The Randolph-based nonprofit has since grown into a network of more than 200 locations serving more than 25,000 people of all ages and their families. Students include not just those with autism but also those diagnosed with mental retardation, mental illness and brain injuries. Projected revenue for the coming year is $306 million.

Christian says part of the institute's success is rooted in good timing; when he joined the then-struggling May Institute, he was the only staff member with a doctorate. Thus, Christian wrote all the grants applications and brochures. He was entrusted with all the hiring. The rest of the staff was getting only $5,600 a year.

"The fact that the program was in very poor shape gave me quite a bit of latitude. I could be very bold in terms of a vision," Christian said. "And I have to say from day one I have had the most supportive board of trustees. They have given me so much freedom and so much encouragement."

He also credits his wife, Barbara, and their children, Lauren, Kate and Kent, for their support. All three children have worked at the May Institute, and their daughter Lauren and son also work for the affiliated National Autism Center in Randolph.

Christian devoted considerable time in those early years to data gathering and making assessments, so he had a baseline for evaluating progress later on. He surveyed parents, took photos of the facilities and began designing an infrastructure he could replicate elsewhere.

"His whole theory is evidence-based care. There are a lot of people handing out stuff about autism that don't know what they are doing," said board member Bob Whitley. "May bases its treatment on research, evaluates outcomes and encourages staff to continually get more training."

The May Institute originally worked with young children, but Christian soon expanded services to those who had reached adulthood.

He launched collaborations with hospitals. He sought accreditation from the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Health Care Organizations and from the Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities.

"He's really built a full-service program in an area mostly dominated by small local vendors," said Deanie Russo, May's chief clinical officer. "One of the most important things: He has been able to lead the organization through its quantum of growth. He provides a very strong sense of who we are and what we do and what our mission is."

Russo, who holds a doctorate and certifications from the American Board of Professional Psychologists and the American Board of Behavioral Psychology, is an example of the institute's upgraded professionalism. May now has about 45 staff members with doctorates at its headquarters, plus more around the country.

"We have hundreds of people working on master's degrees and Ph.Ds all the time," Christian said.

Christian has been tough as well as nurturing.

"He moved some people out who were not performing up to his standards. But he handled it very well. He's not a ramrod kind of a guy at all," said Whitley.

The May Institute's Walter Christian has taken what was a small, nonprofit school with an annual operating budget of $280,000 and grown it into a $306 million operation with 200 locations serving 25,000 patients with autism.

When you are aggressive and ambitious, if the program you are managing doesn't grow you are probably going to leave," Christian said. "I have never run out of challenges here."

Lifetime Achievement

Name: Walter Christian
Title: President and CEO, May Institute

Years on the job: 30

Quote: "When you are aggressive and ambitious, if the program you are managing doesn't grow you are probably going to leave. I have never run out of challenges here."

THE JOURNAL
CHAMPIONS IN HEALTH CARE

~ Congratulations to the 2008 Honorees ~

- Administrator -
  Jeanette Clough, Mt. Auburn Hospital
  Gary Gottlieb, Brigham & Women's Hospital

- Community Outreach -
  Roseanna Means, Women of Means
  Kristin Faingaa and Sue Burke,
  Shriners Hospitals for Children-Boston

- Employer -
  Fallon Community Health Plan
  Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

- Innovation -
  Chan Russell, Phase Forward
  Benjamin Heywood, PatientsLikeMe

- Lifetime Achievement -
  Walter P. Christian, May Institute
  Eugene Braunwald, Brigham & Women's Hospital

- Nursing -
  Anh Lewin, Emerson Hospital
  May Shields, Hearth Inc.

- Physician -
  Paul Hesketh, Caritas St. Elizabeth's Medical Center
  Paula Johnson, Brigham & Women's Hospital

Please join the Boston Business Journal in honoring these health care professionals at the
Champions in Health Care Awards

This breakfast event will be held at:
The Charles Hotel, One Bennett St., Cambridge
Friday, Sept. 26, 2008, 7:30 a.m. - 9:30am.

Register at:
http://boston.bizjournals.com/boston/event/3902