

Person of the Month dedicated to community medicine

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
Friday, 17 May 2019 03:09



RMCHCS CEO David Conejo once worked for a dollar a month

Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services CEO David Conejo was recently recognized by Becker's Hospital Review as a member of the group *60 Rural Hospital and Health Systems CEOs to Know in 2019*.

Conejo spoke with the *Sun* May 8 about what the award means to him, as well as what it means for RMCHCS and the rest of Gallup.

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The award is given to the most viable hospitals that are making advancements in areas such as mobile centers, and care for difficult conditions including stroke, diabetes, and trauma, Conejo said.

While the award was given to Conejo specifically, he said that he is just one of the people who make the progress that is recognized by Becker's Hospital Review. He said that the work is also performed by the nurses, technicians, doctors, and other workers in the hospital.

"They recognize those CEOs for those accomplishments," he said. "The recognition goes to one person, but it is a community accomplishment."

BACKGROUND

Conejo attended the University of Minnesota from 1976 to 1980, completing two certificate programs in hospital trusteeship and health care administration. He completed a bachelor's and then a master's degree in hospital administration in 1984 at Columbia Pacific University in California.

The first period with RMCHCS ran from 1983 to 1994. Conejo spoke about his goal of setting up a hospital in a rural community, and how every place has its challenges.

Specifically, Conejo spoke about how in January 1989, 31 people died in Gallup from alcohol-related causes, or nearly one person every day.

This issue was brought up by then-mayor Edward Munoz, Conejo said. Since then, Conejo made it his goal to raise awareness and consciousness of the problems within the community.

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“If [other cities] were losing one person a day, the whole state would be clamoring on what to do,” he said. “People have to be conscious of the problem and what we have to do about it, and get them to respond to the problem.”

Conejo said when he first came to Gallup, there were two hospitals, one of them being Rehoboth. The hospital chairman at the time had a vision for ways that the hospital could improve the lives of patients, and be reaching and encompassing, he said.

“At the end of the day, I want to say, ‘I make a difference [in community lives],’” Conejo said.

CALLED TO RETURN

While Conejo did leave Gallup for about two decades, he eventually decided to return after receiving phone calls from elected officials in 2014.

“They wanted me to come back because the hospital was in dire straits,” Conejo said. “[RMCHCS] was so much worse than before, with low morale, and an unresponsive administration, they said.”

According to Conejo’s resume, RMCHCS lost more than \$3.5 million in 2014. The hospital was about \$16 million in debt and had about two days’ worth of cash reserves when he was contacted in September 2014.

Conejo said that he was not going to entrust the job of stabilizing RMCHCS to anyone else.

“I said if they immediately turn the hospital [over] to me for management, I would work for a

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dollar a month for the first four months,” he said. “[I told them] by end of the year, I’ll have stopped all the bleeding.”

As a result of his efforts, RMCHCS has been profitable since 2015. The debt has decreased since then and the hospital, as of May 8, has about \$9 million of cash reserves, according to Conejo.

LOOKING BACK

Conejo said that there were two vital developments that occurred between his first time working at RMCHCS and his current tenure.

“[The first time], there was no consciousness of the problems in Gallup,” he said. “We had trouble getting people to accept responsibility, it was a harder challenge getting people to respond.”

But being able to move to and work in cities like Nashville and Lubbock, Texas meant that Conejo was able to pick up a variety of different skills that he could transfer back to Gallup.

And not only did Conejo change and grow, Gallup did as well, he said.

“The community became more aware of the problem, and gained more resources to help it,” he said. “When I came back they needed someone to organize [the recovery efforts]. Things came together faster the second time because they were aware of the problem. They saw the recovery, meaningful jobs, and were more inclined to want to help.”

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Conejo said that dealing with these difficult circumstances as well as state regulations, and the frequent changes in hospital administration, have helped him to grow in the role.

He specified that his career has always been about new ownerships, mergers and acquisitions, and how he and others have to adjust to them.

“Everything I’ve had to deal with has been a turnabout situation,” he said. “You develop patience with the process.”

From there, Conejo said that it is important to build trust with and gain the support of the local community, by listening to what they want and having their best interests at heart.

“That support is crucial because that determines if people will come to you for care,” he said.

MOVING FORWARD

When asked where he hopes to take RMCHCS in the future, Conejo spoke about how large advances have been made in technology in the past decade.

He spoke about how hospital staff is now able to quickly pull up information with devices that are readily available, allowing them to communicate instantaneously, instead of waiting to hear back from other people.

“Rural hospitals have to take a lead in the development of telemedicine,” he said.

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Conejo recalled a time when he needed a prescription refilled and how he was able to go to a Safeway in Whitefish, Mont. and get his refill there, because the store could quickly communicate with the Safeway in Gallup and verify his information.

Finding avenues such as this to get people services and medication they need in a quick and convenient manner, while ensuring accuracy and clear communication, is a key step that hospitals like RMCHCS have to take to remain successful, Conejo said.

“All kinds of technology similar to this gets us into the mainstream of healthcare services,” he said. “Within the next 10 years, we need to be going out into that telemedicine.”

ONE LAST NOTE

The *Sun* asked Conejo if he wanted to share something that most people may not know about him. He recalled an encounter he had with a particular employee back in 1976 when he was the CEO at St. Ann’s Hospital in Waterdown, S.D.

A young man, who was borderline mentally challenged, came to the hospital and wanted work, according to Conejo. Not wanting to turn him away, the hospital created a role for him, where he could ferry materials between offices and staff.

A few weeks later, the young man was paid for his efforts. He then came to Conejo to speak with him about his payment.

Conejo initially thought the hospital had made an error on his check, but it turned out to be something far more powerful to him.

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“[The man] said, ‘Do you know this is the first check I’ve ever received in my life? I wanted to thank you for it,’” Conejo said.

This incident made Conejo reflect on how many people may never talk about the opportunities they are given.

“That single event showed me what could happen if people are given a chance,” he said.

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