



Women healthcare leaders in Jackson defy national industry trend

Women CEOs lead Jackson-area health care industry



Allegiance Health CEO Georgia Fojtasek poses for a portrait in her office on Friday, February 7, 2014 at Allegiance Health. (Michelle Tessier | MLive.com)

By **Lisa Satayut** | Lsatayut@mlive.com on February 19, 2014

JACKSON, MI – A few months before graduating from high school, she was told she had two career options. She could become a nurse or a teacher—that was it. But for Georgia Fojtasek, the chief executive officer of Allegiance Health, that wasn't good enough. "It was very clear that's what women became," Fojtasek said. "As I decided to go to college, my mom told me my dad was wondering why I was thinking about more education. I had more education than he did, and it was time for me to settle down." February marks the 20th anniversary of Fojtasek's 20-year career as the CEO of the hospital. Whether it's mental health, community health or a hospital, the gender of a majority of those specifically serving as healthcare CEOs in Jackson County defies the national trend.

While women hold a large presence in the healthcare industry making up 73 percent of medical and health service managers nationwide, only 4 percent rise to CEOs at healthcare organizations and 18 percent at hospitals, according to a **2012 report** by **RockHealth** which used data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nearly all of the major health organizations in the county, with the exception of the county health officer, are run by women.



Center for Family Health CEO Molly Kaser poses for a portrait in her office on Monday, February 10, 2014 at the Center for Family Health. (Michelle Tessier | MLive.com)

Molly Kaser, CEO for the Center for Family Health, said women in Jackson have a history of changing the trend. “I don’t think anyone here really thinks much of it, it’s the way it has been for a long time,” Kaser said. Kaser started as program director in 1990 when the community health agency was known as the Center for Healthy Beginnings. After working in a number of positions she was promoted to CEO in 2011. Kaser’s predecessor at the Center for Family Health also was a woman. So was Maribeth Leonard’s. Leonard is the CEO of LifeWays, the community mental health agency for Jackson and Hillsdale counties. “I don’t think anyone in this town really blinked when all of this occurred,” Kaser said.

Even as young children, all three knew they would wind up in the healthcare industry, but none ever thought they would be leading one.



LifeWays Community Mental Health CEO Maribeth Leonard poses for a portrait in her office on Thursday, February 6, 2014 at Lifeways Community Mental Health. (Michelle Tessier | MLive.com)

For Leonard, her “drive” to work in the mental health field stems from an emotional childhood. “I came from a background of child abuse and was in the foster care system,” Leonard said. “I ended up with a wonderful family who adopted me and having come from a background of mental illness and child abuse I can relate.”

The report identified a range of barriers facing the advancement of women serving as CEOs, including a lack of female role models and mentors. This was not the case for Kaser who was able to seek guidance from her predecessor, Marsha Kreucher. “It’s a pretty heavily female organization...it’s just the way it naturally occurred,” Kaser said. While both Kaser and Leonard worked with female mentors, Fojtasek did not have that opportunity.

Lacking a female mentor didn’t bother her though; when Fojtasek started she decided to put gender to the side and instead reached out to those who knew what she didn’t. They were mostly men who were former CEOs. “They gave me gifts of insight. It’s been a series of people who gave freely of their time,” Fojtasek said. “It doesn’t matter what profession you are in, it all gets down to some of the basic principles like the school of hard knocks.”

Breaking down the barrier

All three CEOs agree the glass ceiling is not as prevalent in the healthcare industry as it is in the business world, at least not in Jackson. “Within the nonprofit world, I don’t think it’s (glass ceiling) still there, certainly not in Jackson,” Kaser said. Leonard agreed, saying the barrier that once existed no longer does in Jackson, mostly due to the amount of time the women have served in the community. “I’ve actually felt more supported here because of my long years of service and the many hats I’ve worn,” Leonard said. But just in case, Kaser prepared herself early on to tackle any challenges in the workplace. As the youngest child in the family, fairness was extremely important to Kaser.

“Amongst our staff I’m always attuned to whether people are being treated fairly, occasionally I’ll get people who are unreasonable and not pleasant to work with but I don’t think it’s because of my gender,” Kaser said.

Fojtasek said advancing in the healthcare industry is more about what a person can achieve, versus gender. “I do think healthcare is different. Twenty years ago people wouldn’t have thought that a woman would be representing General Motors, that’s a huge statement for that corporation,” Fojtasek said.

Words of wisdom

Whether its passion or surrounding yourself by the right people, all three women agree education is the foundation to breaking down any potential barriers for future women CEOs. “And drawing on the wisdom of people with different experiences,” Fojtasek said. “It’s about being able to build abilities to be able to develop a team and work through huge challenges...and all of that takes a willingness to grow.” As a daily reminder, Fojtasek has a picture hanging on her office wall that reads “When nothing is certain, everything is possible.”

“It’s about what you can become so you can make an important difference,” she said. For Leonard, it’s passion. “You can break through the glass ceiling. We have the same capabilities men have, if you come with experience or have a passion for what you do it’s a huge asset,” Leonard said.

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