

HEALTH CARE EXECUTIVE – INDIVIDUAL

WINNER: RONALD VIOLI, WHEELING HOSPITAL



JOE WOJCIK

Under CEO Ronald Violi's leadership, Wheeling Hospital in West Virginia built Tower 5, a \$53 million addition that led to an expansion in patient care.

Violi breathes new life into Wheeling Hospital

BY HARRY FUNK

Wheeling Hospital wasn't in the best shape when Ronald Violi arrived.

"It was down about \$60 million," said Violi, the West Virginia hospital's CEO. "It had no credit line left. It had no ability to pay its bills."

That was in early 2006. Six months after he took the helm, the hospital started to turn a profit, and it continues to do so.

If Violi's name in the context of such a story rings a bell, consider he essentially achieved the same results at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh in the 1990s.

"His reputation in the health care community is as one of those kick-ass, make-the-organization-work kinds of guys," said Robert Wild, shareholder and director, public company services, for Pittsburgh accounting firm Alpern Rosenthal. "He knows how to run businesses, and businesses that make money."

Wild nominated Violi as a Health Care Hero, citing his "passion for his fellow man and hands-on executive

experience" in restoring two regional hospitals to viability.

Violi's impact on Wheeling is not limited to finances. Under his leadership, the hospital has substantially increased the number of specialty physicians.

"We made the decision early on that we were going to provide as many subspecialties as we can here, so people don't have to travel," Violi said. "In many instances, it's a real financial hardship for them."

His background is not in health care, but in retail. Violi and two partners founded the Appliance Store Inc., eventually growing it into a \$200 million business before he sold his interests in the late 1980s.

By that time, he was serving on the board of directors for Children's Hospital, raising questions about its economic state. "You can do better?" the hospital's chairman at the time asked him.

The answer turned out to be, yes. Drawing on his business background, Violi changed the culture of the way the hospital was run, resulting in a dramatic financial turnaround.

Bishop Michael Bransfield of the Diocese of

Wheeling-Charleston, which owns Wheeling Hospital, took note of Violi's accomplishments and invited him to give West Virginia a try.

"It was pretty much the Children's model," Violi said. "We renegotiated contracts with vendors, modernized the hospital and brought it up to date."

The hospital's major accomplishment was the construction of Tower 5, a \$53 million addition that houses an emergency trauma center, private patient rooms and physicians' offices.

Along with expanding patient care, the Tower 5 project provided employment opportunities, with more than 300 local tradespeople hired for various facets. Wheeling Hospital continues to be the largest single-site employer in the Ohio Valley.

"I think the bottom line is what you can do for the community," Violi said. "For me, that's the big payback. I'm very proud of the fact that this institution has been able to contribute as much as it has to this community."

HARRY FUNK is a freelance writer.