

Health Care CEO Profile: Javon Bea, Mercyhealth

# A Lifetime of ‘Doing the Next Right Thing’



Photos courtesy of Mercyhealth

Javon Bea rose from humble beginnings to achieve a storied career. Last September, the Mercyhealth Board of Directors recognized his success by naming Mercyhealth’s Rockford Campuses Javon Bea Hospital and Physician Clinic-Riverside and Javon Bea Hospital and Physician Clinic-Rockton.

By Lindsey Gapen, managing editor

Since childhood, Javon Bea has been laser-focused on success. Today, he’s the President and CEO of Mercyhealth, a multi-regional health system with seven hospitals and 85 primary and specialty care locations throughout northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.

But at age 7, he was a poor kid growing up on the far west side of Rockford who didn’t have a nickel for a Popsicle.

“I really, distinctly remember this,” Javon says. “I didn’t like the feeling of not having a nickel in my pocket.”

His father struggled with alcoholism and only made about \$12,000 a year working for the Rockford newspaper. His mother was preoccupied trying to raise 12 children – six boys and six girls – of which Javon was the youngest boy and second youngest overall. He shared a bedroom with all five brothers, sleeping on bunk beds and rationing water for showers.

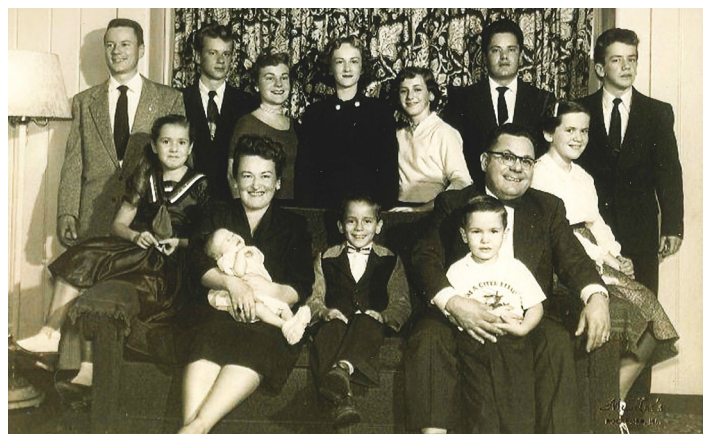
He knew if he wanted something, he’d have to work for it himself. “My biggest advantage in life was having no advantage,” he says.

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Javon earned his first \$5 by helping a neighbor out with some yard

work. “After that, I realized I never wanted to find myself without money again,” he says. “I think that’s what led to years of really working hard.”

At age 8, Javon saw his older brother working on a paper route and decided to start his own. He bought newspapers,



Javon (in front of his father) grew up with 11 siblings, sharing a room with all five of his brothers.





As a child, Javon began working by operating his own paper routes.

delivered them around town and earned tips. By age 12 – the typical age for starting a paper route – he was a young entrepreneur operating three routes of his own.

“I hired two friends to deliver papers for me, and then I did the collections,” Javon says. He also started a successful lawn mowing and snow shoveling business that he hired friends to help out with.

“Once I earned that first \$5, I was never without money again,” he adds. “My wife even says I never had a childhood, and I suppose I didn’t. But I look back and think that was OK. It was out of necessity.”

At first, Javon just wanted to save money and pay for the necessities in life. He didn’t necessarily have any career aspirations. That changed at age 16, when he took advantage of a work-study program offered at his high school.

From 7 a.m. to noon, Javon received a full education at Auburn High School before working a janitorial job from 1 to 5 p.m. at Rockford Memorial Hospital (now Mercyhealth Javon Bea Hospital and Physician Clinic–Rockton). While mopping the floor of the physical therapy department, in particular, Javon saw what he could eventually do with his life.

“I was always watching the staff,” he says. “It was eye-opening to be in a professional setting. I realized I wanted more than what I had seen around me growing up; I wanted to break out of what I’d been born into.”

Javon asked if he could volunteer in the physical therapy department and was soon hired as a physical therapy tech. He knew he would have to pay for college on his own, so during the summer he worked full-time at the hospital before working additional jobs in the evenings at Jewel and Shakey’s Pizza.

“It was all with the goal of going to college, knowing I was going to have to do it on my own,” he says.

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One day after work, Javon had the gumption to approach the CEO of Rockford Memorial Hospital in the parking lot.

“I asked him how I could get involved in hospital administration, and he told me ‘Well, since you’re in physical therapy, why don’t you become a physical therapist and if you still want hospital administration, you can go on afterwards,’” Javon recalls.

“You see, in health care, if you are going to lead a multi-disciplinary team of specialists, it doesn’t hurt to have been one of them.”

After receiving a scholarship from the Rockford Memorial Auxiliary, Javon went to Northern Illinois University (NIU) with renewed inspiration to become a physical therapist. At the time, NIU didn’t have its own physical therapy program, but Javon knew where he wanted to end up.

“I knew I had to be accepted into the physical therapy graduate program at the Mayo Clinic [in Minnesota] because it was the only physical therapy school in the country that didn’t charge tuition to attend,” he says.

There were only 20 spots available, and 2,000 students applied. “By the grace of God, I was accepted,” Javon says.

“The key is to each day suit up and show up to wherever you’re supposed to be and do the next right thing. I remember studying physics one time at NIU and I looked out the window and saw Vietnam riots happening. It’s not that I was some goody two-shoes, but I knew if I didn’t do well in school, if I had one hiccup, I was done. I didn’t have the privilege of spending time protesting.”

Javon was so laser-focused that he and his wife, Vita, even joke about him spending their wedding night with a cadaver.

“She doesn’t let me forget that,” Javon laughs. The couple met at Rockford Memorial Hospital the summer before Javon went to grad school. Three months later, they were married.

“I had a big anatomy exam at the Mayo Clinic Monday morning, so I had to work on dissecting my cadaver after the wedding,” Javon explains. “I’m just saying, when I’m focused, I’m really focused.”



Javon was once a janitor at Rockford Memorial Hospital. There, he developed an interest in physical therapy but hoped to someday venture into hospital administration.





Javon and his wife, Vita, have six children and 10 grandchildren. Here, the family celebrated the naming of "Javon Bea Hospital."

Not only did the Mayo Clinic grant free tuition, but it also paid students a monthly stipend to cover food and lodging. All of the academic work was crammed into 12 months, or 44 hours a week, not counting hours set aside for studying.

"I only slept maybe three hours a night," Javon recalls.

His second year at Mayo consisted of full-time work as a physical therapist under supervision.

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Javon enjoyed physical therapy, but he knew it wouldn't keep him satisfied for the next 40 years of his life. Still, hospital administration was a distant goal in his mind.

Walking home one night after work, he met the Franciscan Sister Generose Gervaise – the CEO of St. Mary's Hospital, which is a hospital that serves the Mayo Clinic doctors. Javon didn't recognize her. To him, she was just an ordinary woman dressed in gardening clothes – baggy jeans and big hat – trying to lift a big bucket of fertilizer into a wheelbarrow.

"I just went over to her and said 'Hey, can I help you lift that?' and she said 'Yeah, you can.' And then she drafted me to break up the dirt in her garden," Javon laughs.

He helped her for a couple of hours, telling her about his 11 siblings and life in Rockford, plus his ambitions to someday work in hospital administration.

A couple of days later, he thought he might be in trouble.

"My physical therapy supervisor told me I was being summoned to the CEO's office," he recalls.

When he walked in and realized the CEO was Sister Gervaise, he was in awe. She offered him a coveted yearlong administrative internship and promised to help him get into the University of Minnesota's

Masters of Administration program. "Minnesota's MHA program is kind of like the Harvard MBA program of health care," Javon explains. "At that time, more than 80 percent of hospital CEOs in the country were Minnesota graduates."

Javon recognizes that he was in the right place at the right time. But still, it was up to him to extend the offer to help.

"I use this as an example of good things coming from always doing the next right thing."

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After his internship at St. Mary's, Javon did get into Minnesota's MHA program. Once again, the academics were crammed into one year, followed by a year of administrative residency, which he completed at Mason Clinic/Virginia Mason Hospital in Seattle.

When he was done, Sister Gervais wanted Javon back. To the surprise of many, she asked Javon to return and serve as one of three operating vice presidents (at the time called administrative assistants) at St. Mary's Hospital.

"This was a 1,250-bed hospital, the largest in the country at the time, and I was 26 years old," Javon emphasizes. "Directors in their 40s, 50s and early 60s, who have budgets larger than entire community hospitals, reported to me. They knew me as an intern just two years before, and now I'm their boss. I think back to that and go 'Wow, I can't believe she did that.' She set me up for either big-time success or big-time failure. But again, it was on me."

Thankfully, Javon was used to working hard. He was used to the pressure of needing to prove himself. It was daunting to regularly give presentations to the board of directors at the Mayo Health System, but Javon did the job.

"I just suited up, showed up and did the next right thing," he says.



Javon's personal motto is to "Suit up, show up and do the next right thing."



Ten years later, Javon moved on to work as COO of Providence Hospital just outside Detroit. But after only three years, at age 39, he felt called to come home.

“My mother was here in Rockford, and she had contracted cancer,” Javon explains. “I was very close to her, and I knew she didn’t have more than a few years. And my wife’s family was all from Rockford, too. So, when I actually got a call from the recruiter at Mercy in Janesville, I was interested.”

Mercy Hospital (now Mercyhealth Hospital and Trauma Center) in Janesville was only a 240-bed hospital with only \$33 million in revenue and struggling to make payroll. Javon had worked with single departments at St. Mary’s that had larger budgets.

But returning home felt right.

“I knew there was tremendous potential to grow the organization,” he says. Javon is proud of what he’s accomplished with Mercyhealth these past 30 years. But times were rough when he first started in 1989.

Sometimes, doing the next right thing is difficult. In order to save Mercy Hospital from its financial troubles, Javon knew he’d need to make big, sweeping changes.

And change is bound to be controversial.

Despite resistance from physicians, Javon took steps to make Mercy a vertically integrated health system. This involved changing how the hospital worked with its physicians. Since there had been no new physicians joining the hospital medical staff in more than four years, Javon began hiring board-certified specialists and subspecialists as employee partners.

“A hospital employing physicians was very controversial back in 1989,” Javon says. “Our new Family Practice Residency Building was fire-bombed. My wife and children were all threatened. People didn’t realize how much trouble Mercy was in financially.”

When Javon first

started at Mercy Hospital, every clinical physician had privileges in the hospital’s intensive care unit (ICU). But after a patient died because of an improperly placed breathing tube, Javon immediately took away ICU privileges from all physicians except those with specialized training in ICU procedures.

“A large physician clinic in town even sued me personally because they were threatened, and made up charges in their lawsuit that didn’t stand up in court,” Javon says. But for him, it was clearly the right thing to do, since he believed it was a decision made in the best interests of all patients.

After 30 years of making Mercyhealth more and more vertically integrated, Javon knows he made the right decisions.

“A large part of the Affordable Care Act deals with how health care is delivered, and how we need to gradually, over decades, force the health care industry to vertically integrate,” Javon explains. “The way we’re aligned and organized is why we’re unbelievably successful today. We are already in the future.”

Four years ago, Mercyhealth expanded into northern Illinois when it merged with Rockford Health System, meaning Javon has come full-circle since his days of mopping floors. In the past four years, Mercyhealth has invested \$1 billion in the Rockford region to improve access to primary and specialty care services, hired more than 250 new multi-specialty physicians, invested tens of millions into renovating the Rockton Campus and built a \$505 million state-of-the-art Riverside campus.

Not bad for a guy who once couldn’t afford to buy a Popsicle.

“Don’t get me wrong, my wife will tell you I’m far from perfect, but I have always tried to do the next right thing,” Javon says. “In many ways, it’s very achievable because we live life one moment at a time.

“My advice to people is to stay the course and always do the next right thing. When we serve others in any capacity, it has a ripple effect. Whatever you do in life, if you serve others, it goes on and on.” ■



In only 28 months, an empty field became Mercyhealth’s Javon Bea Hospital and Physician Clinic-Riverside, which opened in January 2019. A total of \$505 million went into the campus.



In 1989, Javon became President and CEO of Mercy Hospital in Janesville.