Building a healthy tomorrow

At Mercyhealth, passion drives us to deliver medical excellence with a compassionate touch for the very best patient experience. That’s why we’re excited that area residents will soon have access to a new hospital specially designed to serve women and children.

Located on I-90 at E. Riverside Boulevard in Rockford, this beautiful and spacious hospital and medical center campus will feature:

- 188 private room inpatient beds
- A state-of-the art women’s and children’s hospital
  - State-designated regional perinatal center
  - The highest level neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)
  - Pediatric and pediatric intensive care (PICU) units
  - High-risk maternity care
  - Pediatric emergency services
- Level I (highest level) trauma center
- An adult sub-specialty hospital, including plastic and reconstructive surgery, brain and spine care, endocrinology, orthopedics, pulmonology and heart services, and more
- Technologically advanced operating suites and surgical services to support a full range of inpatient and outpatient surgery, including minimally invasive surgery, image-guided surgery and robotic surgery
- Comprehensive diagnostic center with lab and imaging
- Multi-disciplinary physician care clinics serving adult and pediatric patients
- Comprehensive cardiac, peripheral and neurovascular interventional laboratory

Opening January 2019
DEAR READER:

When I was growing up in the northwest Chicago suburbs, my only knowledge of Rockford came from the annual trip our church youth group made to Magic Waters (which is technically in Cherry Valley). I knew nothing else about the third largest city in the state of Illinois, best known for its manufacturing industry. Then, I became editor of "Great People. Great Stories," and I started exploring the treasures in Rockford and other towns in Winnebago County. Every few months, I get the pleasure of sharing with you the discoveries I have made.

Let’s start with Rockford City Market. What a unique idea — an event that draws people to the downtown area, includes music and activities for family and children, and gives local entrepreneurs an opportunity to test their business in a low-risk fashion. The market has helped several locals realize their dream of opening a store-front retail operation — and even many of those who haven’t created brick-and-mortar establishments have been able to launch successful catering and shipping businesses.

Then there are the world-class pediatric subspecialists on staff at Mercyhealth. The health care system is hard at work building its new women’s and children’s hospital at the intersection of I-90 and East Riverside Boulevard. In the meantime, its specialists are changing children’s lives — including Jasigh Knight, a baby boy who experienced severe heart problems while in utero. Under the watchful eye of Suhaib Kazmouz, MD, pediatric cardiologist at Mercyhealth, he was born safely and now is thriving.

Just down the road from Mercyhealth is the United Way of Rock River Valley, which is making great strides in providing support to Rockford’s most impoverished neighborhoods through the Strong Neighborhoods program. Dedicated individuals like Matt Simpson, a neighborhood impact manager, develop vital relationships with members of the community to give them access to the programs they need.

I’ve already met lots of fascinating people — but I want to meet more. If you know someone with a story to tell, drop me a line at editor@gpgsmagazine.com.

Beth Earnest
EDITOR, “GREAT PEOPLE. GREAT STORIES.”

Visit us at gpgsmagazine.com
Twenty-six years ago, a group of Pecatonica High School students, recent graduates and their parents formed a theater group so they could continue to have performance opportunities after high school. This grassroots organization, called Pec Playhouse Theatre, performed most of its shows at the high school and American Legion Hall and was funded solely through donations and proceeds from a car wash.
When Pecatonica High School ended its drama program a few years later, the fledgling group became even more important as it was now the main theater outlet for local high school students. In 1998, Pec Playhouse Theatre (PPT) entered into an agreement with the Pecatonica Heritage Museum to use space in its building complex. Over the years, the group raised enough money to add comfortable seats, heating, air conditioning, lighting and other necessities for the theater, and it purchased the building in 2004.

While the high school reinstated its drama program in 2015, Pec Playhouse remains a vital part of the community — especially for families. “Pec Playhouse started with a group of families who wanted their kids to have theater,” says Jen Thompson of Machesney Park, the publicity chairperson of the group and a frequent participant in its shows. “At a time when other arts organizations are struggling, we are doing really well.”

PPT’s actors, directors, backstage workers and volunteer support staff all speak fondly about their “little theater,” an organization and building that has thrived through the blood, sweat and tears of its supporters. “It’s such a quaint theater setting,” says Jen. “It’s a place where everybody can come and be together.”

In one of PPT’s recent shows, “Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Christmas Carol,” several participants decided to make it a family affair and work with their loved ones. Here are a few of their stories:

A LIFELONG PASSION

As a young woman, Jen Thompson always knew she wanted to make theater a big part of her life. She majored in theater and communication in college, and afterwards landed some contract gigs as a stage manager. She earned a master’s degree in theater but eventually decided that a steady job with benefits was appealing, so she moved away from full-time theater. Now, she works as the marketing coordinator for Rockford Public Schools.

Still, theater has been a big part of her life. “It’s a great way to fill your time with them. I find a lot of enjoyment in doing theater, and the fact that my kids enjoy being there too is an added bonus.”

“I just like performing. It helps me through a lot of stuff and I get to meet new people.” – Maya Thompson

“Sherlock” marked the first time Jen Thompson had the opportunity to direct her daughter, Maya, doesn’t remember that time, theater must have gotten into her blood. She has performed in productions at their church and in 2014, she, her mom and her brother Miles, 9, all were in the Christmas show at Pec Playhouse. In November 2016, her mom directed her in “Sherlock.”

“I just like performing,” says Maya. “It helps me through a lot of stuff and I get to meet new people.”

“As a mom, it’s really nice,” adds Jen. “I like my kids, and I like to spend time with them. I find a lot of enjoyment in doing theater, and the fact that my kids enjoy being there too is an added bonus.”

BONDING TIME

Mike and Bennett Freeze of Rockford have become Pec Playhouse’s go-to guys. The father-and-son duo each have performed in several shows at the theater, and now they receive calls from directors asking them to audition. “Pec Playhouse is just such a neat little treasure,” says Mike, who works as a nurse manager for a hospice company. “It’s got a shoestring budget and a bunch of super-dedicated people who pour their heart and soul into it.”

In “Sherlock,” Mike played the title character and Bennett, 19, played a younger version of his father’s character and the play’s second ghost, Oscar Wilde. The timing was perfect, because in September Bennett returned from a year-long trip to the United Kingdom on a volunteer visa.

“I had been away from home for a while, and this gave us something to do together,” says Bennett.

Previously, Mike played a supporting role in the show “All Shook Up” while Bennett, who was 16 at the time, played a wandering musician.

“Sherlock” marked the first time Jen Thompson had the opportunity to direct her daughter, Maya.

Mike and Bennett Freeze played two different versions of Sherlock Holmes in “Sherlock.”

Then, the following year, Bennett played the lead role of Peter in “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

“It’s a lot of fun to come back to Pec,” says Bennett. “It’s a really family-friendly place.”
YOUNG PRO

When he performed in “Sherlock,” Tony Miller of German Valley, Illinois, received plenty of unsolicited advice about his performance — from his 13-year-old daughter, Taylor. Taylor was frustrated that her dad had adopted a Scottish accent for one of his characters when she believed he was perfectly capable of learning a more appropriate English accent.

Tony kept a sense of humor about his daughter’s criticism because, after all, she has more experience onstage than he does — over the last three years, Taylor has performed in eight productions at Pec Playhouse. Her dad decided to join the fun during the summer of 2016 with the musical “Sugar,” and in the fall, “Sherlock” was his first show with Taylor. “I felt like I was putting more into it because she was sitting there watching me,” he says.

Though she’s not onstage, Toni, Taylor’s mom, spends plenty of time at Pec Playhouse, too. She started as a volunteer in the makeup room, and now she’s on the board at the theater. “I knew nothing at first, but everyone at Pec Playhouse was very nice, helpful and encouraging,” she says.

The three Millers have found something they love doing together as a family, and they don’t plan on stopping any time soon. “I love using my imagination and playing different characters,” says Taylor.

To learn more about Pec Playhouse’s upcoming production in Pecatonica, Illinois, visit pecplayhouse.org.
Ian Linnabary and his wife Cynthia are not the sort of people to lie around the house and watch TV all day. They keep busy — Ian as a freight salesman for a flatbed trucking company and Cynthia as a ceramics artist — and have high hopes of continuing to travel and enjoy life for the next few decades. They know all too well that heart disease can be life-limiting and even deadly, which is why they have chosen to work with the expert heart specialists at Mercyhealth since learning that Ian, 64, suffers from cardiovascular disease.

Their relationship with Mercyhealth started 14 years ago when Ian was training to participate in an adventure race — a multi-day event that involves canoeing, mountain biking and running — with his two adult children. He was on a business trip, walking quickly through Detroit Metropolitan Airport, when his chest suddenly felt strange. After returning home, he underwent a stress test and saw a cardiologist, who performed an angiogram — an X-ray photograph of the blood vessels. That doctor told him he needed heart surgery right away. When he sought a second opinion at Mercyhealth Heart and Vascular Center at the Rockton Avenue Campus, the Mercyhealth cardiologist told him that while a few of his arteries were 60 to 90 percent blocked, he didn’t need surgery immediately. Rather, he could keep his heart disease in check through medications, exercise, changing his diet and controlling his stress — a plan which could give him many good years before he would need heart surgery. “I said I could definitely manage three out of the four,” says Ian. “Stress is a part of life, so I didn’t know how much I could do about that.”

“It’s important to have an open conversation with your cardiologist,” says Timothy Swain, MD, cardiothoracic surgeon at Mercyhealth.
“You need to examine all the options and determine what is best for you at your stage in life.”

Management through medication and lifestyle changes worked wonderfully for Ian... although he knew that eventually, he would need to undergo bypass surgery to fully open his clogged arteries.

**TOP-NOTCH CARE**

Ian and Cynthia spend many of their summer weekends traveling to juried art shows where Cynthia can show and sell her creations. Ian is her self-proclaimed “ground crew,” hauling her booth necessities to and from the car. In August 2016, he was walking fast across the parking lot when he experienced the worst discomfort he had ever felt in his chest. He saw his cardiologist at Mercyhealth right away, who scheduled an echocardiogram — an ultrasound heart test — and a nuclear stress test, during which a small amount of radioactive tracer is injected into the vein, and a special camera detects the radiation released by the tracer to produce computer images of the heart.

The results were conclusive: Ian needed quadruple bypass surgery, a procedure in which the surgeon uses a blood vessel taken from elsewhere in the body and attaches it to the diseased artery, rerouting blood around it. The surgery was scheduled for August 15 with Dr. Swain at Mercyhealth Hospital - Rockton Avenue.

“Well knew it was coming,” says Ian. “Even though I was apprehensive, everyone that I came in contact with put me at ease. They explained every part of the process to me so that I felt completely comfortable.”

During the procedure, Dr. Swain performed beating heart surgery on Ian, using grafts made from his own tissue to bypass blood flow around the blocked vessels. “Because he is so young, surgery was a good option to keep him healthy for years to come,” says Dr. Swain. “He had a very good result from this procedure.”

For his part, Ian was happy with every caregiver he had, starting with the diagnostic tests. “I can’t say enough about the support staff at Mercyhealth.”

Five weeks after surgery, Ian was back to work, and he has been feeling good ever since as he spends time with his wife and five grandchildren. “My wife and I have always talked about living long, healthy lives,” he says. “We don’t want to be invalids and not be able to travel. This surgery has helped me move toward that goal.”

To make an appointment with a provider at the Mercyhealth Heart and Vascular Center at the Rockton Avenue Campus, call (815) 315-1588.
In fall 2016, Mercyhealth launched the new Mercyhealth Orthopedic Specialists at the Mercyhealth Physicians Building, located on the Rockton Avenue campus, 2350 N. Rockton Avenue. The $5 million investment included a complete renovation of the building’s fourth floor, new X-ray technology, 22 exam rooms, two cast rooms, a waiting area and furnishings. Mercyhealth also welcomed four orthopedic surgeons who are now accepting new patients at Mercyhealth Orthopedic Specialists: Marko Krpan, DO, board certified orthopedic surgeon; Dean Fochios, MD, board certified general/sports orthopedic surgeon; David Ajibade, MD, board certified general/sports orthopedic surgeon; and Elizabeth Pickvance, MD, the only board certified pediatric orthopedic surgeon in the region.

To make an appointment at Mercyhealth Orthopedic Specialists, call (815) 971-7400.

The Mercyhealth Orthopedic Specialists clinic features 22 exam rooms and two cast rooms. Pictured here is one of the procedure rooms.

Mercyhealth’s complete team of orthopedic physicians includes, from left: David Ajibade, MD, Marko Krpan, DO, Elizabeth Pickvance, MD, and Dean Fochios, MD.

CHEMOTHERAPY CENTER

Mercyhealth is in the process of renovating the chemotherapy treatment area in the Mercyhealth Cancer Center at the Rockton Avenue Campus. The $1 million renovation, which will be completed in spring 2017, will include a new infusion bay, an exam area and a waiting area.

To make an appointment at Mercyhealth Orthopedic Specialists, call (815) 971-7400.
In 2010, the newly created Rock River Development Partnership decided to try something new — a weekly, outdoor event from May through September along the Rock River that would bring together the community and promote local businesses. The planners hoped Rockford City Market not only would boost sales for already established businesses, but also would serve as an incubator for start-ups. Beyond those eight, many other vendors have developed extensive catering businesses and have nurtured accounts in other parts of the country to which they ship products. “Rockford City Market is focused on keeping vendor fees very low,” says Cathy. “That allows our vendors to start their businesses in a low-cost way. They can try different flavors, colors or products so they can see what works. And they have exposure to thousands of people every week who can give them valuable feedback.”

In its first year, Rockford City Market averaged about 1,200 attendees every week. Now, it averages about 5,000 per week over the 20-week span of the market. It includes two different performance areas, two children’s activities hosted by local nonprofits, and one cooking demonstration every month. About 70 vendors display their wares over the course of the market’s five months.

Bella Luna Bakery
Perhaps one of the market’s most notable vendors is Bella Luna Bakery, which was chosen to be the anchor of Rockford City Market seven years ago. Friends Polly Happach of Winnebago and Lorie Parker-Weinrich of Rockford were working in a school together when they discovered they both liked to bake. Polly took a class for small business entrepreneurs and the two women decided to test their products at a fundraiser for Mayor Larry Morrissey’s mayoral campaign. The mayor gave their names to the Rock River Development Partnership, which shared its idea for the market with Polly and Lorie. They agreed to be one of the 13 vendors that would kick off the event in its first year.
Calling their business Bella Luna Bakery, the women went to great lengths to bring customers to their booth, including making signs to greet visiting state representatives and offering cooking demonstrations. During a big storm in 2010 when the rest of the city lost power, Rockford City Market was the only place where locals could find food. “The storm wiped out Bella Luna’s tent, but Polly and Lorie adapted and sold out of the back of their van instead,” says Polly. “Failing was not an option for us,” she says. “We never lost money on products because we made small batches to see what would sell. We decided we were too old to go into debt.”

After a three-year search for the right location, Bella Luna opened a storefront in Millennium Center in September 2013. By that time, Bella Luna had made a name for itself by catering weddings, showers and special events, and its customer base was just waiting to have easy access to its Italian and Scandinavian treats. The bakery now is located at 308 W. State Street in Rockford. It has become a destination for people looking for a cookie and a reassuring hug. Lorie, left, and Polly specialize in Italian and Scandinavian fare — although they are willing to make anything their customers want.

Joe D’Astice has found his passion in cooking pizza. Joe D’Astice and his wife Anne moved to Rockford to be closer to her place of work, he saw a newspaper article about the upcoming Rockford City Market. He always had enjoyed making pizza for his family, so he decided to use a mobile woodfired pizza oven to serve the Italian favorite at the market. “We were very well-received from the start, because what we were doing was new and unusual,” he says.

After his second year at the market, Joe began looking for a downtown home base for Woodfire Brick Oven Pizza. It took him four years to find his current location at 408 E. State Street. In the meantime, he found other gigs, including vendor spots at Anderson Japanese Gardens’ Tuesday Evening in the Gardens and Edgebrook Farmers Market, and catering jobs. “My feeling was that if what we were doing worked well when we were out and about, it would be a proof of concept,” he says.

His brick-and-mortar restaurant opened in May 2015 and quickly has become a Rockford staple. “We took a chance, and it worked out for us,” he says.

Bath and Body Fusion
Jen Ralston was able to turn a hobby into a business when she opened Bath and Body Fusion.

Jen Ralston has spent years researching natural products online for use in her own life. After her two siblings suffered from severe brain injuries following two separate car accidents, she began making bath balms and soaps in her grandmother’s kitchen as a form of therapy. Friends urged her to sell her wares, so she opened a booth at Rockford City Market in 2011. Soon, she developed a loyal following of customers who begged her to expand to her own storefront. “I was a single mom, so the idea of opening a store was scary for me,” she says. “I thought it was just going to be a side hobby that would earn me some supplemental income.”

Instead, it became clear to Jen that she needed to take the leap. She opened her first store inside Stuart Square in 2013, then moved to a 3,000-square facility at 324 E. State Street in July 2015 to expand her national wholesale business. Bath and Body Fusion is known for custom blending of fragrances; customers can choose from more than 200 different fragrances to create their own essential oils and bath balms. The store also has a “face bar” where employees custom-blend face masks to match customers’ skin types.

“I feel so blessed each day to be doing what I love,” says Jen.

Joe D’Astice has found his passion in cooking pizza. The bright, bold Bath and Body Fusion has attracted a loyal following in Rockford.
If you find yourself walking through the Ellis Heights neighborhood at about 7 am on a weekday morning, you’re likely to see a parade of sorts: a dozen or so young children, backpacks in tow, all on their way to school. They’re part of the Walking School Bus, a United Way-sponsored program that offers a safe route to school for children who live less than 1.5 miles from Lewis Lemon and Ellis elementary schools — the threshold for bus service in the Rockford School District.
Great People. Great Stories

The Walking School Bus is one of the United Way’s programs that specifically serves families in the Ellis Heights and Midtown neighborhoods.

The Walking School Bus is just one of a multitude of programs the United Way has invested in to help the residents in two of Rockford’s most impoverished neighborhoods — Ellis Heights and Midtown. “We wanted to focus our resources on the people we felt needed them the most,” says Linda Sandquist, vice president of the United Way of Rock River Valley. “These are also the people who had the greatest potential for success.”

COMMUNITY-SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

The key to the program is what the United Way calls “boots on the ground” — staff members who have invested significant time in becoming a part of the community. Matt Simpson, the neighborhood impact manager for Ellis Heights, is one of those staff members. Matt graduated from Rockford’s Auburn High School in 2005 and received his master’s degree in public administration from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. He was working with the Housing Authority in the Ellis Heights neighborhood before starting with the United Way in August 2014. As a neighborhood impact manager, Matt began attending neighborhood association meetings, visiting local churches and getting to know the residents of Ellis Heights.

He spent months simply listening to what the people in the community wanted and needed, and then he and other United Way leaders worked with their partner agencies to develop programs that would build stronger neighborhoods. “It’s important to work with institutions that are trusted in the neighborhood so you don’t have to do as much heavy lifting,” says Matt. “You bring food to the meetings you’re attending, and gradually people start to trust you.”

One of the ideas that came out of Matt’s networking was ParentH.O.O.D. (Helping Our Own Develop). ParentH.O.O.D. is a series of programs aimed at providing support for parents. The United Way collaborated with Ellis Elementary School to create monthly family night events. During the events, families receive a free meal, then the Rockford Park District keeps children engaged with activities while their parents participate in programs with topics such as jobs, education, mental health and substance abuse. In addition to providing valuable information, the programs also create networks of support among parents so they feel better equipped to reach out to their neighbors when they need help. As a result of the programs, which started during the 2015-16 school year, school officials reported that parental engagement increased by 36 percent. “It’s awesome, because it’s based on our families’ needs and interests,” says Taren Turner, principal of Ellis Elementary. “As educators, we always seek to develop the whole family and work with the community. The United Way has been the glue that holds everything together.”

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This year, the United Way introduced another program, ParentH.O.O.D. Promise, which provides one-on-one support to families of elementary-age children. Each of the families in the program has regular meetings with an advocate who helps them create a plan to address obstacles in their life such as housing, careers, income or problems with their children. The program is called ParentH.O.O.D. Promise because both the families and the advocate make a promise to each other that the child will graduate high school.

A HUB OF SUPPORT

In addition to providing support for families through the Strong Neighborhoods program, the United Way is working to develop relationships between families and police officers. That’s where the Strong Neighborhoods House comes in. In both the Ellis Heights and Midtown neighborhoods, police officers have established a permanent office in a donated house over the past year. The houses came at the request of Mayor Larry Morrissey and are modeled after a program in Racine, WI.

The point is to make police officers trusted figures in the community. At the Ellis Heights house, community service officers have established a regular Thursday movie night, in addition to providing support for families through the Strong Neighborhoods program, the United Way is working to develop relationships between families and police officers. That’s where the Strong Neighborhoods House comes in. In both the Ellis Heights and Midtown neighborhoods, police officers have established a permanent office in a donated house over the past year. The houses came at the request of Mayor Larry Morrissey and are modeled after a program in Racine, WI.

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WALKING SCHOOL BUS

Even before the newest initiatives, though, there was the Walking School Bus, which was established nearly four years ago. It’s the result of a partnership between the United Way, Winnebago County Health Department, YMCA of Rock River Valley, Rockford Housing Authority and Youth Services Network. The premise is simple: Families sign up for the program through Lewis Lemon and Ellis elementary schools. Each of the “busses” starts at a designated time and place, and as the children walk single file behind two adult leaders, they pick up other children at each corner — just like a real school bus would do. “If we know there’s a student who normally walks with us who wasn’t at the intersection, we will often go to her door to see where she is,” says Sharetha Lewers, the program director and a YMCA employee. “The kids really enjoy it. We sing songs and play I Spy, and use the opportunity to teach the children about safety.”

The program has been immensely successful: During the 2015-16 school year, the average Lewis Lemon student had 23 tardies, while the children who were part of the Walking School Bus averaged four tardies.

“We’re glad to be able to provide this service to families who are in need,” says Sharetha. “We have built relationships with the children and their families.”

The Irving Avenue House has become an important part of the Ellis Heights neighborhood.

Matt poses with his young friends at the United Way’s Strong Neighborhoods Irving Avenue House.

WALKING SCHOOL BUS

attracting as many as 40 children each week. They occasionally host special events for both the children and their families. “If the kids are coming there, the parents will follow,” says Paul Logli, president and chief executive officer of the United Way of Rock River Valley. Additionally, various social service agencies host financial literacy and other educational classes at the houses, and the University of Illinois Extension has created a community garden at one of the houses. “The Neighborhood Houses are aimed at helping students be successful in school, connecting parents to jobs and making the neighborhood healthier,” says Matt.

Matt poses with his young friends at the United Way’s Strong Neighborhoods Irving Avenue House.

Children learn important safety skills from their leaders in the Walking School Bus.

Two different Walking School Busses begin about a mile and a half away from Lewis Lemon and Ellis elementary schools, and pick up kids along the way.

“WALKING SCHOOL BUS”

Great People. Great Stories. | Winter 2017

LIFE IN YOUR COUNTY AND BEYOND

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Every time Amanda Casson saw a new doctor, she knew exactly what she would hear: “You need to lose weight.” It’s a familiar litany, as she has struggled with her weight for most of her life. After experiencing four pregnancies, she found that she just couldn’t stop the weight from piling up — and it didn’t help that she underwent three cervical spinal surgeries in 2009. Because she still experienced so much back pain, she was unable to work out as much as she wished she could. And it was affecting her in more ways than one — she suffered from Type 2 diabetes, and though she took three different types of insulin, her blood sugar levels were far from healthy.
When Amanda, who lives in Cary, IL, started seeing Ishmeet Singh, MD, pain management specialist with Mercyhealth, he, too, told her that her best chance for long-term health was to lose weight. He suggested bariatric surgery, also known as weight loss surgery. In 2015, Igal Breitman, MD, surgeon with Mercyhealth, began performing bariatric surgery at Mercyhealth Hospital - Rockton Avenue.

“I had always been interested in bariatric surgery,” says Amanda, now 35, who weighed 330 pounds at her heaviest. “The problem was that it was not offered close enough to my house. I figured that good things come to those who wait.” When she heard that Dr. Breitman had started at Mercyhealth, she knew this was her opportunity to begin a healthier lifestyle.

EXTENSIVE PREPARATION

Bariatric surgery has been available in the United States since the 1960s and has been proven to be an excellent, safe way to lose weight. The most common type of bariatric surgery is the laparoscopic gastric bypass, during which the surgeon shrinks the size of the stomach and bypasses part of the digestive system so the patient does not absorb as much food. In the procedure, the surgeon uses small incisions to cut across the top of the stomach, sealing it off from the rest of the stomach and creating a pouch that can hold only about one ounce of food. Then, he sews part of the small intestine onto the pouch so that food bypasses most of the stomach and part of the small intestine, limiting absorption.

In order to qualify for bariatric surgery, a patient must have a body mass index (BMI) greater than 40, or greater than 35 if the patient also suffers from at least two obesity-related conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease or heart disease. At Mercyhealth, patients first come to a free informational session where they learn all about the different options. “The patient is the one who ultimately decides what type of surgery he or she wants,” says Dr. Breitman. “We spend a lot of time giving patients the tools they need to make this decision.”

When a patient decides to move forward, she first meets with Dr. Breitman and a nurse coordinator to discuss goals and the kind of support system she has in place. Then, she undergoes a long preparation process that includes:

• Medically supervised weight loss
• Meetings with a dietitian
• A sleep study
• An upper endoscopy
• Meetings with a psychologist and cardiologist
• A smoking cessation program if she is a smoker

“Not only do we need to know the patient is healthy enough to undergo surgery, but we also have to believe she is committed to losing weight,” says Dr. Breitman. “I need the dietitian to assure me she is compliant.”

Ten days before the surgery, the patient adopts an all-liquid diet to clear the bowels and reduce any extra fat in the liver. Then, it’s time for the big procedure.

AMAZING RESULTS

Amanda underwent her surgery on August 17, 2016. By the time she returned to the Mercyhealth Rockton Avenue Campus for her three-week follow-up appointment, she already had lost 25 pounds. She is continuing to lose weight at a faster pace than she ever would have thought possible. In November, Amanda and her family joined their local YMCA so they could start becoming more active as a family. “I feel a lot healthier and I have more energy,” says Amanda.

But the weight loss isn’t even the most extraordinary outcome of the surgery. Before her procedure, Amanda’s fasting blood sugar hovered between 200 and 400 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL), while a normal blood sugar level should stay below 100 mg/dL. Immediately following surgery, Amanda’s blood sugar level dropped to between 70 and 80 mg/dL. “The people in Dr. Breitman’s office couldn’t believe it,” she says. “I used to be so hot all the time. Now I feel like I’m back to being a human being.”

“It was amazing how quickly Amanda’s blood sugar dropped. It was like magic.”

– Dr. Breitman
Because a patient undergoes such dramatic hormonal changes both before and immediately after surgery, Dr. Breitman says, it can affect the blood sugar level. “It’s a very common phenomenon,” he says. “But it was amazing how quickly Amanda’s blood sugar dropped. It was like magic. She went home without any diabetes medication.”

Amanda has found that the support of Dr. Breitman and his staff has carried her through one of the biggest changes of her life. “Anything I need, I can call them at any time of the day,” she says. “They’re like a second family to me.” She returns to see Dr. Breitman and a dietitian on a regular basis to make sure she is staying healthy and on the right track.

Now that her health is on the upswing, Amanda hopes to get off disability and go back to work. Before she began experiencing all her back problems, she worked as a patient care technician; she would like to return to school soon and become a nurse. “I’m adapting to a whole new life now,” she says. “It feels so good.”

In addition to gastric bypass surgery, Mercyhealth offers other options for bariatric surgery, including:

LAPAROSCOPIC VERTICAL SLEEVE GASTRECTOMY:

During this procedure, the surgeon removes roughly 80 percent of the patient’s stomach, which reduces the amount of food that can be eaten at one time. The procedure is recommended for patients with high-risk conditions and those who have had previous abdominal procedures. Patients typically spend one night in the hospital and lose 60 to 80 percent of their excess weight.

REVISION SURGERY:

During this procedure, the surgeon repairs patients who previously experienced complications with their bariatric surgery.

To learn more about bariatric surgery at Mercyhealth, call (815) 971-BARI.

“‘I’m adapting to a whole new life now, and it feels so good.’

AMANDA CASSON

OPTIONS FOR BARIATRIC SURGERY
On September 26 and 27, Midway Village Museum in Rockford hosted one of the largest World War II re-enactments in the United States. More than 1,200 uniformed re-enactors from 40 states represented soldiers from the Allied and Axis troops. Spectators at the event could wander through soldiers’ base camps, watch realistic skirmishes in the historic village, and listen to talks from “General Patton” and other historical figures. On Saturday night, re-enactors and spectators alike let loose at a USO-style swing dance at the Indoor Sports Center in Loves Park.
Justin Kapkart of Farmington, Illinois grabs some water.


Wilhelm Krupp of Sheboygan, Wisconsin waits for his turn on the battlefield.

Antina Richards Pennack of Rockford, Illinois, and Michael Pennack pose by one of the authentic vehicles used in the battles.

Esther Schleper of Franklin, Wisconsin was one of the women who re-enacted the World War II-era All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.

Eric Oehlberg of Solon, Ohio camps out between battles.

Justin Kapkart of Farmington, Illinois grabs some water.

Antina Richards Pennack of Rockford, Illinois, and Michael Pennack pose by one of the authentic vehicles used in the battles.
Jan Lunquist is not the type of woman to fret about a medical diagnosis. Her litany: "It is what it is." As she fights one of the biggest battles of her life against endometrial cancer, her cheerful outlook on life has become her most important asset — along with the compassionate care she receives at Mercyhealth. "Why be miserable?" says Jan, 56, who lives in Winnebago, IL. "I can’t do anything to control the situation, so I just need to trust the doctors who are caring for me."
The nurses gave us the feeling that taking care of Jan was the only thing they had to do,” adds Nancy, a former nurse herself.

About a week after the surgery, Jan learned that Mercyhealth staff had found cancerous cells in her lymph nodes, which meant she had stage 3 endometrial cancer. She would need chemotherapy and radiation therapy in addition to her surgery.

Dr. Mahdavi put together a plan for treatment, and Jan decided she wanted to undergo chemotherapy close to home in the Mercyhealth Cancer Center on the Rockton Avenue campus.

While chemotherapy was exhausting for Jan, she appreciated the friendly, caring staff at the Mercyhealth Cancer Center. “They were absolutely wonderful there,” she says. “And Dr. Mahdavi has been nothing but professional. He is very knowledgeable about the kind of cancer I have.”

Jan’s daughters Natasha Urbanowitz, 21, left, and McKayla Urbanowitz, 18, have supported their mother as she has undergone surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

“The nurses gave us the feeling that taking care of Jan was the only thing they had to do,” adds Nancy, a former nurse herself.

Jan’s daughters Natasha Urbanowitz, 21, left, and McKayla Urbanowitz, 18, have supported their mother as she has undergone surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

JAN, her daughters, and her parents, Stan and Nancy, have weathered many storms together.

Jan was in the hospital for two days following her surgery. During that time, she says, the care she received from Dr. Mahdavi and her nurses was second to none. “Dr. Mahdavi’s bedside manner was wonderful,” she says. “He made sure I was comfortable and understood what was going on.”

Jan, whose mother Nancy, left, has accompanied her to many of her appointments, has developed a comfortable rapport with Dr. Mahdavi.

Dr. Mahdavi’s bedside manner was wonderful. He made sure I was comfortable and understood what was going on.”

– Jan Lunquist

Throughout her life, Jan has experienced irregular periods. So when she noticed spots of blood, it was difficult for her to tell whether she was entering menopause or there was something wrong. When she had one episode of especially heavy bleeding, she received a referral to a gynecologist with Mercyhealth. The physician scheduled her at Mercyhealth Hospital - Rockton Avenue for a dilation and curettage (D&C), a procedure to remove tissue from the inside of a woman’s uterus. But he cut the procedure short: He had found cancer.

“It was horrible,” says Jan’s mother, Nancy, who received the news of her daughter’s diagnosis in the waiting room. “You never want to hear a doctor tell you your daughter has cancer.”

Dr. Toussaint referred Jan to Ali Mahdavi, MD, FACOG, gynecologic oncologist with Mercyhealth. A gynecologic oncologist is a physician with expertise in three different areas — gynecology, surgery, and medical oncology. He can treat and manage the care of women with endometrial (uterine), ovarian, cervical, vulvar and vaginal cancers. In Jan’s case, a total hysterectomy was the first step in treating her cancer. At the time, Dr. Mahdavi was only practicing in Wisconsin, so Jan traveled to Mercyhealth Hospital and Trauma Center in Janesville for her hysterectomy.

During the surgery, which was on July 5, 2016, Dr. Mahdavi removed her uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries, cervix and lymph nodes in a minimally invasive, robotic-assisted surgery. “Because I have such specialized training, I can perform complex surgeries such as radical hysterectomies, in which I remove the lymph nodes as well as all the reproductive organs,” says Dr. Mahdavi. “When I am performing other gynecologic surgeries, I also am trained to remove part of the bowel if necessary.”

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Jan, a former nurse herself, adds Nancy, a former nurse herself.
psychological state. It is very important that I have a close relationship and open communication with the patient.

While Jan always has been involved with many activities, especially the Girl Scouts of America, she has had to take a step back during her cancer treatments because her immune system has been compromised. As she continues with her chemotherapy and radiation therapy at the Mercyhealth Cancer Center, she is moving forward as best she can. Her two daughters, Natasha, 21, and McKayla, 18, have been big supporters as she moves through her cancer journey, as have her parents, Nancy and Stan. “I try not to let anything stop me,” says Jan.

Now, Dr. Mahdavi is seeing patients in Rockford as well as Janesville, and Jan is grateful he’s so close to home. “I sure think they sent me to the right person,” she says.

To make an appointment with Dr. Mahdavi in Rockford, call the Cancer Center at (815) 971-6188.

“Dr. Mahdavi has been nothing but professional. He is very knowledgeable about the kind of cancer I have.”

JAN LUNQUIST
In many ways, Leticia Carpenter of Rockford exhibits all the characteristics of a brand new mother. She revels in every cute thing her baby boy Jasigh Knight does, and she often places her hand on his chest — just to make sure his heart is beating properly. Jasigh is actually her third baby, not her first, but before he was born, she experienced a scare that would put any mother on edge — his heart was beating dangerously fast. Fortunately, Leticia delivered Jasigh at Mercyhealth Hospital - Rockton Avenue, a hospital widely known for its top-notch pediatric cardiology care. Under the watchful eye of Suhaib Kazmouz, MD, pediatric cardiologist at Mercyhealth, Jasigh was born safely and now is thriving.
Leticia first learned there was a problem with her son when she received an ultrasound at 29 weeks’ gestation. She had gestational diabetes during her pregnancy, so she already was at high risk for complications — and when a maternal-fetal medicine specialist at Mercyhealth saw that Jasigh’s heart rate was too high, he referred her to Dr. Kazmouz. Dr. Kazmouz admitted her to the hospital right away.

“The baby was diagnosed with atrial flutter, an abnormal heart rhythm that originates from the atria of the heart,” says Dr. Kazmouz. “This condition could be life-threatening, so we needed to start Leticia on medications right away to manage the heart rhythm. We had to be mindful not to hurt the mother while still helping the baby.”

Since Dr. Kazmouz started at Mercyhealth in 2014, the health care system has been able to provide cardiac care to children of all ages — including unborn babies. Because he was available to administer medication to Jasigh while he still was in the womb, Leticia did not have to travel far from home to find the care she needed. Instead, she was able to stay in Rockford, close to her 12-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter.

Leticia stayed at Mercyhealth Hospital a total of one month while doctors monitored Jasigh’s heart rate and kept it from soaring to a higher level. “Dr. Suhaib Kazmouz, MD, pediatric cardiologist at Mercyhealth

Jamina, 3, and James, 12, adore their baby brother Jasigh.
Kazmouz is a good doctor,” she says. “I’m hard to deal with sometimes. He worked with me, even though I was frustrated because I had to be in the hospital, and he explained everything to me.”

**MIRACLE BABY**

Throughout Leticia’s stay, Dr. Kazmouz worked closely with Mercyhealth’s maternal-fetal medicine specialists to make sure both Leticia and Jasigh stayed healthy. Their goal was to keep Leticia from going into labor for as long as possible. “We were able to keep the baby inside to give him a chance to grow as much as he could,” says Dr. Kazmouz. At 33 weeks’ gestation, Leticia’s water broke, and Nicole Macaulay, MD, obstetrician and gynecologist with Mercyhealth, performed a cesarean section to deliver Jasigh so his heart would not be under pressure in the birth canal. He was born on March 29, 2016 at 7 pounds, 4 ounces.

After Jasigh was born, Dr. Kazmouz immediately used a defibrillator on him and shocked his heart into a normal rhythm. Then, Jasigh spent the next month in Mercyhealth’s Level III (highest level) Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), where neonatologists gave him the care he needed until he was healthy enough to go home. When he has returned for follow-up visits, his heart has been beating at the correct rhythm and he is completely healthy.

“We call him our miracle baby. He’s doing really well now. I’m so glad everything worked out okay.”

– Leticia Carpenter

Jasigh’s father, James Knight, was relieved that Mercyhealth specialists kept both his wife and baby safe before, during and after delivery.

**THE REGION’S PEDIATRIC LEADER**

Mercyhealth offers a full range of pediatric subspecialties, including:

- Pediatric cardiology
- Pediatric endocrinology
- Pediatric gastroenterology
- Pediatric neurology
- Pediatric surgery
- Pediatric orthopedics

Additionally, Mercyhealth Hospital - Rockton Avenue has the region’s only pediatric intensive care unit.

**To schedule an appointment with one of these specialists, call (815) 971-2000.**

**PEDIATRIC HEART CARE**

Dr. Kazmouz and S. Asif Masood, MD, both are pediatric cardiologists who provide the highest level of care to their patients. They offer:

- Diagnosis and management of fetal cardiac anomalies and fetal arrhythmias
- Diagnosis and subsequent pre- and post-surgical management and follow-up of congenital heart disease
- Comprehensive assessment of heart murmurs, acquired heart disease and cardiac arrhythmias
- Adolescent cardiology, including syncope, chest pain and palpitation
- Evaluation and management of adult congenital heart disease
- Management of blood lipid disorders

Diagnostic services include:

- Electrocardiograph (EKG) interpretation
- Arhythmia evaluation and management
- Echocardiography, including transthoracic (TTE) and transesophageal (TEE)
- Exercise testing
- Fetal echocardiography

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- Fetal echocardiography
CALENDAR
OF EVENTS

MARCH

1 AN EVENING WITH KRISTIN CHENOWETH AND THE ROCKFORD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Coronado Performing Arts Center, 314 N. Main St., Rockford
Rockfordsymphony.com

MARCH

FEEDING
If you are choosing to breastfeed your baby, this one-time class offers practical information and support to enhance your breastfeeding experience. It is very important that mothers-to-be have strong support of their decision to breastfeed, so we strongly encourage that your partner or another support person attend this class with you.

Classes are held 6:30-9 pm on February 20, March 20 and April 17, and 9:30 am-noon on February 4, March 4 and April 1. Class fee is $25.

PREPARING FOR CHILDBIRTH
Mercyhealth offers a class to prepare for both a vaginal or cesarean birth, as well as for becoming a parent. These small classes are especially recommended for first-time moms-to-be and their support persons. Class fee is $25.

Classes are held 9 am-4 pm on February 18, March 11 and April 29. There also is a two-night option: Classes are held 6-9 pm on February 15 and 22, March 15 and 22, and April 12 and 19.

INFANT AND CHILD CPR
A basic CPR class is very valuable for new parents, grandparents or babysitters. Learn simple techniques that can save the life of your baby. This is a free, non-certified course. Class will be held 1-3 pm on February 11 and April 8.

SAFE SITTER
The Safe Sitter program is a nationwide, not-for-profit, medically oriented instructional program designed to train young persons aged 11 to 13 how to be safe baby sitters. The program teaches baby sitters proper childcare skills and how to handle major and minor medical emergencies. Safe Sitter is a 14-hour, two-day course that is held 9 am-3:30 pm on March 27 and 28. Class fee is $60.

FEBRUARY

20 COFFEE WITH THE CURATOR
10 am
Rockford Art Museum, 711 N. Main St., Rockford
Rockfordartmuseum.org

21 ROCKFORD SYMPHONY – THE THREE VIOLINS OF RACHEL BARTON PINE
7:30 pm
Coronado Performing Arts Center, 314 N. Main St., Rockford
Rockfordsymphony.com

27 CHARLOTTE’S WEB: STEVE DITZELL
7:30 pm
Emerson House, 420 N. Main St., Rockford
Mendelsohnpac.org

MARCH

JUNE 29, 2017
MERCYHEALTH DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION AMBASSADOR GOLF OUTING
Giovanni’s Restaurant & Convention Center, 610 N. Bell School Road, Rockford

SEPTMBER 30, 2017
MERCYHEALTH DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION GALA
Beloit Country Club, 2327 S. Riverside Drive, Beloit, WI

SIBLINGS UNDERSTANDING NEWBORN
This class helps prepare children ages 3-10 for the arrival of their new baby brother or sister and to reassure them of their special role in the family. Class fee is $5 per child. Class will be held 6-7:30 pm on January 19 and March 23.

SMOKING CESSATION PROGRAM
Looking to quit smoking? Mercyhealth offers a smoking cessation program, a four-week class with one-hour weekly meetings. For more information, call (815) 971-LUNG. This program is affiliated with the American Cancer Society’s Fresh Start Program.

LIFE IN YOUR COUNTY AND BEYOND

Great People. Great Stories. | Winter 2017

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MERCYHEALTH
CLASSES – WINTER 2017
When aches and pains get in the way of enjoying the things you like to do, it’s important to look for answers. Mercyhealth orthopedic specialists are prepared to help you resume your normal life. **So heal faster, grow stronger and live the passion that moves you.**

For more information about Mercyhealth orthopedic specialists, please call (815) 971-7400.