



# Small-Town Roots, Big-Time Achievements

THA's 2016 Chairman John Henderson Serves His Community, His Patients and His Hometown Hospital

By Debbie Ritenour

**J**ohn Henderson, CEO of Childress Regional Medical Center, knows his life could have gone in many directions. He might've been a baseball player. He might've been a doctor. He might've been the chief financial officer of an urban hospital. Or he might've been diagnosed with cancer and struggled to find medical care like one of his hospital's patients, Chris.

"He's 41, like me. He has three kids the same ages as mine," Henderson said. "He's me with bad luck."

Chris, who lives 45 minutes from Childress in Crowell, once owned a dairy operation that was the largest employer in Foard County. The business was forced to close, and Chris then received a stage 4 colon cancer diagnosis. He qualified for disability payments, but that meant he didn't qualify for Medicaid for 18 months.

Without insurance, he wasn't able to get treatment.

Henderson and CRMC stepped up to help him. First they started treatment, and then they helped get him insurance during open enrollment in the federal health insurance marketplace.

"We've become friends," Henderson said. "It's stories like that that matter."

As the 2016 chairman of the Texas Hospital Association Board of Trustees, Henderson will bring that same compassion and commitment to his new role. He'll work to unite Texas hospitals and help them speak for the industry – and for Texas patients – with one voice.

"It's all about meeting human need," he said "You can't fix every problem, but there are a lot of things we can do."



## Coming Full Circle

The Henderson family has long had roots in Childress, which has a population of about 6,000. Henderson's grandfather was a carpenter who owned the local lumber company, and Henderson's parents met in high school. Henderson himself was born in Houston when his father was in medical school, but the family returned to Childress when he was 4 years old.

"I kind of grew up at this hospital," Henderson said. "I remember coming out here with my mom and my brothers to bring food to my dad."

Not all the visits were pleasurable, he notes.

"When I was an adolescent and would stay out too late, my dad would wake me up in the morning and say, 'You're coming with me,'" he said. "I'd spend the day at the hospital with him as punishment."

The oldest of four boys, including a twin brother, Henderson remembers his childhood as full of baseball, wrestling and mud. His childhood ambition was to be the short stop for the Houston Astros, but he discovered pretty quickly that that was not going to be his career path. His eye turned to health care.

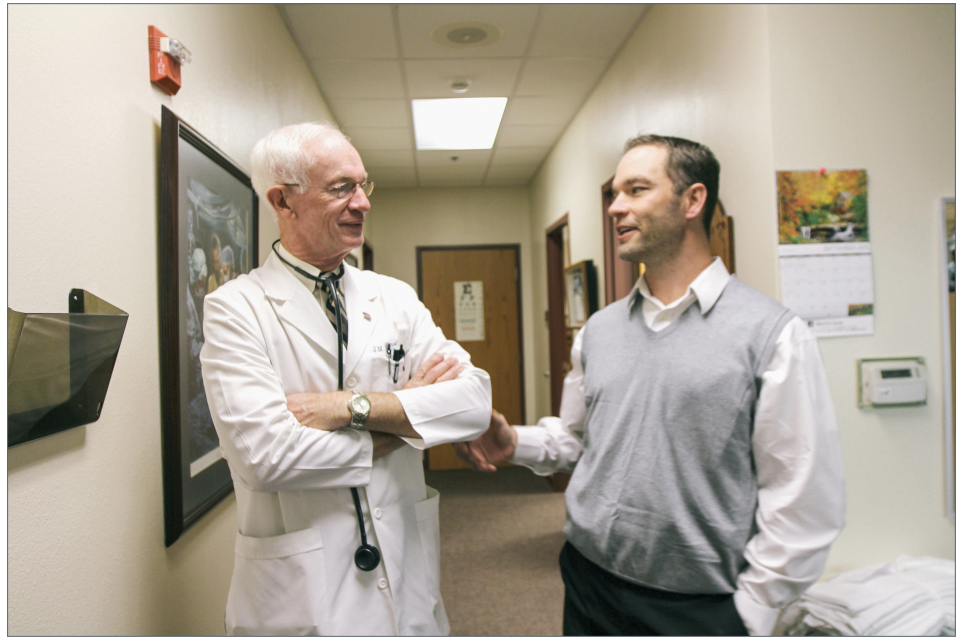
"At one point I was interested in medical school," Henderson said. "One day I scrubbed in to watch a C-section. I had a surgical mask on, and I remember thinking, 'It's getting really hard to breathe in here,' and the next thing I knew I had passed out. I decided at that point that I was going to go to business school."

Henderson received his Bachelor of Business Administration from Abilene Christian University in 1996. During the summers and holidays, he would come back to Childress and work under the guidance of Administrator Frances Smith. He went on to receive his M.B.A. from Texas Tech University in Lubbock before accepting his first full-time position at Denton Regional Medical Center. After about three years in Denton, he received an unexpected phone call from Smith.

"Frances called out of the blue and said, 'I'm thinking of retiring. Would you consider working with me for a few months and then running your hometown hospital?'" Henderson said. "I really hadn't done anything to earn or deserve that, but Frances had seen some potential."

Today, Henderson's life has come full circle. He still spends mornings at CRMC with his father, only this time it's by choice.

"Most mornings he'll stop by my office and say good morning and drink a cup of coffee with me. That's probably the best thing about my job," he said.



Henderson's dad, Mike Henderson, M.D., has been working at CRMC since 1978. He stops by his son's office almost every morning for a cup of coffee.

## Making a Good Thing Better

Henderson is well aware that he inherited a good thing from Smith when he took the helm of CRMC at the age of 27.

"It wasn't broken. It was a good situation," he said. "I've never had to try to figure out how to make payroll or keep services. I've been fortunate."

Nonetheless, he has learned how to make a good thing better in his tenure as CEO. CRMC has added a number of services over the last 14 years in order to better meet the needs of the rural community.

"Childress is basically 120 miles from Amarillo, Lubbock, Abilene, Wichita Falls and Oklahoma City," he said. "That's a problem for patients when it comes to access – not so much primary care but specialty care."

Henderson and CRMC have strived to address that problem over the years.

"Along the way we've taken on a dialysis clinic. My board deserves the credit for that because they knew when we did it that it wasn't going to be profitable, but they said, 'Those patients are too sick to be driving 200 miles three times a week for the rest of their lives.' And we've made that work," he said.

"We've added orthopedic services. We've got a great local orthopedic surgeon. Prior to him, if a grandmother broke her hip, we had to load her on an ambulance and send her on a bumpy trip down Highway 287, and her family would spend a week in Amarillo until she was ready to come home. I hated that. Being able to meet that need locally is a big deal."

Henderson is most proud, however, of CRMC's chemotherapy program, which launched in 2012.

"For years and years it had been a dream of a lot of people here to offer that service. To get a cancer diagnosis no matter where you live will rock your world, but to get a cancer diagnosis and be 120 miles from a treatment center is even worse," he said.

CRMC now partners with Lubbock's UMC Southwest Cancer Center, which hosts a monthly cancer clinic in Childress. CRMC then provides the treatments for three types of cancers: lung cancer, breast cancer and colon cancer.

"We don't do everything, but we do what we can," Henderson said. "I believe there are people who are alive today because of what we're doing."

Henderson notes that CRMC's willingness to try is a big reason the hospital has been so successful.

"We've always tried to say yes when somebody has an idea or there's a possibility to develop something. It doesn't always work, and there are a few of those I regret, but we're always willing to try," he said.

Of course, his leadership also has contributed to the hospital's success, as Howard Head, D.V.M., chairman of the CRMC Board of Directors, points out.

"John has been an excellent CEO. He leads people extremely well and has built a strong leadership team in all departments," Head said. "He is dedicated to providing the highest quality of medical care to our patients and projects that vision to all of our employees."

Ultimately, Henderson couldn't be more proud of his hospital.

"We've never been better at Childress Regional in terms of quality, patient experience and stewardship," he said. "We're doing a good job because we've got good people: a strong board, great local physicians, and great, great staff, particularly our leadership staff and department heads. I want more Texas hospitals to have that experience."

## Goals for THA

Henderson will be one of the youngest chairmen in THA's history when he takes office on Jan. 1. With almost 15 years of experience as the chief administrator of a successful hospital, he's more than qualified for the role.

"John is well-versed on the political side of the health care industry and will be a great chairman for THA," said Larry R. Johnson, vice chairman of the CRMC Board of Directors. "He may be the CEO of our small rural medical center, but I would put his knowledge and leadership abilities up against any other hospital CEO in Texas."

As the 2016 chairman,

Henderson has big goals for THA. First and foremost is coverage expansion. He has been a big supporter of THA's *Insure Health. Insure Texas* campaign, which seeks to increase the number of eligible-but-unenrolled Texans covered through the federal health insurance marketplace.

"Everybody that we get covered, we help, and when we help patients, we help hospital members," he said.

Also high on his list of priorities is the extension of the Medicaid 1115 Transformation Waiver. He notes that THA most likely will be playing a support role in that process, providing education and gathering information to help the Texas Health and Human Services Commission in its negotiations with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

"We've got to have the Uncompensated Care pool to serve as a safety net for hospitals, and we've got to have the Delivery System Reform Incentive Payment pool for innovation if we're going to transform the way we deliver health care," he said.

Even though it's not a legislative year, the Medicaid Disproportionate Share Hospital program remains a hot issue. Henderson notes that every THA member needs to work on finding a solution – together.

"Within our membership, we've got to sit around the table and figure it out," he said, "and then we have to support it."

While those are his top priorities for 2016, Henderson is well aware that they might change. Something might come up; a natural disaster might strike, or changes in Washington, D.C., might require action.

"You've just got to expect the unexpected," he said.

## On a Personal Note

Henderson met his wife of 13 years, Amber, when they were both working at Denton Regional Medical Center. Trained as an EMT, Amber worked in the occupational health clinic, and one day Henderson went to her for a flu shot after a little prodding from a co-worker. The rest, as they say, is history.



Henderson and his wife, Amber, have been married for 13 years and have three children. Pictured left to right are Henderson; Major, 8; Emma, 10; Avery, 12; and Amber.

The two weren't married yet when Henderson received that fateful call from Smith, and he was a little worried about what Amber would think.

"When I moved back to Childress, I knew what I was getting into. The big question mark was how she'd do because she's a city

girl," he said. "Fortunately, she loves it."

The Hendersons have three children: Avery, 12; Emma, 10, and Major, 8. They are devoted to their father, and he is devoted to them.

"We stumble and make mistakes, but we love each other and lean on each other and support each other," he said.

Henderson also is committed to his community. He helped raise funds to rebuild the local Little League field. He also serves as chairman of two local nonprofits; one, Augment, rehabs condemned houses for individuals in need, and the other, Build Hope, organizes trips to Honduras and Mexico to build homes for people in need there.

"John has become a truly exceptional hospital executive as well as the very embodiment of an engaged community leader in his hometown of Childress. I feel his defining characteristic must be how his unassuming and approachable nature coexists so thoroughly with his generous and caring spirit," said Dave Pearson, FACHE, president/CEO of the Texas Organization of Rural & Community Hospitals. "The example he sets as a servant leader both inside and outside his facility is a high standard for us to follow." ★



## For the Love of CRMC

John Henderson isn't the only one who's passionate about Childress Regional Medical Center. Some of the CRMC leadership staff shared why they believe their hospital is so special and so beloved.

*"CRMC has the strongest spirit of excellence and can-do attitude that I have ever been a part of administered with a servant's heart passion. The rare combination of those three qualities infiltrate the entire organization from board members down and make CRMC a unique and incredible place. Our employees and patients alike feel that CRMC is so much more than just a brick and mortar place where workers come for a paycheck and patients come when they are sick – it is the very tangible, wholesome and healing awareness that one feels the minute they walk into CRMC."*

**SuLynn Mester, RN**  
Chief Nursing Officer

*"Our current branding is 'CRMC: It's About the People.' I feel that is our everyday culture – our everyday responsibility. It is about all people: our patients, our visitors, our staff, our physicians, our community. People make us who we are, and people make us better. Focus on the people."*

**Holly Holcomb, RN**  
Chief Operating Officer

*"CRMC is a great place to work because of our culture, our people, our board, our doctors and the support of our community. Our patients are our friends, our neighbors and our family. We take their well-being personally. We know their care requires a collective effort of every single CRMC employee. Personally, I feel privileged to work at CRMC, and I thank God for leading my family to Childress, Texas."*

**Kevin Latimer**  
CFO