

Sister Julie Hyer, Dominican president, steps aside

Hospitals Dominican Hospital
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New challenges await, says two-decade leader of county's largest hospital



HYER
Dominican chief
for two decades

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SANTA CRUZ — Sister Julie Hyer, president of Dominican Hospital for more than 21 years, announced Monday she will step down Jan. 1. An interim president will be named later this week as a nationwide search for her successor begins.

Sister Julie, 58, has been a pillar during two

decades of seismic change at the 369-bed hospital, the county's largest, and for health care generally. She oversees a complex enterprise with annual net revenues of more than \$240 million, 1,700 employees, 500 doctors on the medical staff and more than 500 volunteers.

She said the death of her father in May led to introspection that prompted her decision. She said she felt a need for a sabbatical, with time to think about what ministry to do next.

A member of the Adrian Dominican Sisters, she puts the initials "O.P." after her name, which stands for Order of Preachers.

"Sisters don't retire," she said. "I've got a lot of years ahead of me."

She wanted to be on hand for the hospital's 65th anniversary celebration, which took place Sept. 14. Then she decided the time was right.

"I have been planning this," she said. "I just hadn't been speaking to people about it."

A breast cancer survivor, she marked five years in September since her diagnosis, but added that health issues were not a factor in her decision.

Hospital staffers were surprised by the announcement.

"No one was expecting it," said Mike Lee, hospital communications chief.

See **DOMINICAN** on **PAGE A10**

Dominican

Continued from Page A1

"She's brought us through three major building expansions and countless remodels," said Bob Semas, executive director of the Dominican Hospital Foundation. "This is one of the hardest jobs this side of Washington, D.C. I'd give her an A."

Other major changes during her tenure included the affiliation with Catholic Healthcare West, which has become the eighth largest hospital system in the nation, and buying the AMI Community Hospital on Frederick Street. She was at the helm during the 1989 earthquake.

She came to Dominican from Michigan, where she earned two bachelor's degrees, in math and medical records, and a master's in business administration. She also brought 11 years of hospital experience, starting as a clerk and working her way to the corporate level.

Semas sees her departure as the end of an era.

"My regret is that there's no way we'll get a nun," he said. "They're just not around, and I think that's going to make a big difference."

Diane Siri, president of the Dominican board, echoed that sentiment.

She noted Sister Julie's business skills and strong sense of mission brought the hospital recognition for quality from the Malcolm Baldrige program, as well as fiscal stability.

As the result of her initiative, local residents have access to services that often are not available in a community of this size, Siri

added, citing as examples the neonatal unit for premature babies, open heart surgery and cardiac unit, and acute rehabilitation services.

She commended Sister Julie's leadership to make sure the Catholic-affiliated hospital would provide "a full range of services" to women.

"She's lasted longer than most CEOs last in any business," Siri said. "Our community has been exceptionally lucky."

Dr. Nicholas A. Abidi, president of the Santa Cruz County Medical Society, thanked Sister Julie for her service. He citing her vision to institute an electronic medical record system at the hospital and her role in instituting a leadership academy for physicians.

One of the first women invited to join the Santa Cruz Rotary, Sister Julie was honored as Woman of the Year in 2003 by the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce. This year, Dominican Hospital was selected as Organization of the Year by the Aptos Chamber.

Sister Julie said she is proud of the hospital's charity-care policies and programs to encourage employees who are not nurses to move into those positions.

She described Dominican as "a very healthy organization" that is feeling "the national crisis" in health care.

"The entire health care system needs to be revamped," she said. "That's the decision of our political leaders."

Her successor will have plenty to do. The hospital's strategic plan calls for 10 years of improvements costing \$250 million.

Members of the local board will meet this week with officials from Catholic Healthcare West to dis-

cuss Dominican leadership long term and short term. Semas predicted interim leadership may last as long as a year.

After stepping down, Sister Julie plans a trip to Prague in the spring to make family connections. Her mother's side of the family is from Czechoslovakia.

She has been asked to consider opportunities after her sabbatical but has not made any decision.

"I want to spend the time regenerating, personally, psychologically, physically and spiritually," she said.

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