Home Grown
Community Partnerships Shape Michigan’s Newest Medical School

Western Michigan University
Homer Stryker M.D.
School of Medicine,
Kalamazoo

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The smell of fresh paint still lingers inside the glass-and-steel building that houses Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine in downtown Kalamazoo. The building is now one of the finest learning facilities in the state, housing a state-of-the-art virtual hospital—all manikins as virtual patients capable of exhibiting real symptoms—as well as spaces for team collaboration and the latest medical research tools.

But for all its spectacular architecture and cutting-edge learning resources, the school has its roots in something far more interesting: the local leadership and vision of Kalamazoo's medical community.

"This school would not have been possible without a great deal of local support," said Dr. Hal Jenson, founding dean. "We were very fortunate to have individuals here who saw the opportunity a local medical school can provide, and what it could mean to our region and state."

Three strong local leaders launched the project: WMU president John Dunn, Borgess Health CEO Paul Spaulde, and Bronson Healthcare President and CEO Frank Sardone.

"The hospital leaders had collaborated in the past, most notably on the area cancer center," Jenson said. "Their past work with MSU medical students, which took place under the aegis of the MSU/Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies, folded neatly into the new medical school and formed a solid foundation for clinical education and patient care programs."

Jenson's first day on the job was extraordinary, marked by the announcement of a $100 million gift to launch the school. The gift, which was later identified as a donation by Ronda Stryker and her husband, Bill Johnston, was the first major landmark along the road to success. It was followed later by the donation of a 330,000 square foot building in downtown Kalamazoo by William U. Parfet, chairman and CEO of Mattawan-based MPI Research. The seven-story building is located on the medical school's W.E. Upjohn Campus, named after Parfet's great-
grandfather, William Erastus Upjohn, who started The Upjohn Company in 1885.
Coupled with a 300-member slate of community partners whose planning work would support all aspects of program development, the backing of two well-known area hospitals, and visionary leadership at the university level, the right ingredients for success were in place early.

“Our medical school is unique in Michigan in that it is private,” Jenson said. “We believe it is important to ensure WMU receives all the state funding it needs to support its other high-quality programming without having to fund the medical school’s operation as well. We are working to build our own $300 million endowment, which has helped us be nimble and entrepreneurial in considering the needs of the community.”

Those needs are estimated to include far more physicians in the future. With current projections showing a nationwide shortage of 90,000 physicians by 2020, the WMU medical program is designed to help bring new physicians to a nine-county area in southwest Michigan.

“We know that roughly one-third of the physicians practicing in our nine-county region trained here in Kalamazoo,” Jenson said. “Clearly, the more medical students we bring to the area, the stronger our local pipeline of physicians can become.”

Jenson said the new medical school places a strong emphasis on community involvement and service.

“Our program is designed to ensure students are actively involved in local organizations,” Jenson said. “It’s an element of active citizenship that will help us fulfill our end of this important community partnership.”

Jenson notes there are other regional benefits to result from the school’s location.

“We will establish a platform for biomedical research – the kind of research that can help improve the economy of southwest Michigan down the road,” Jenson said. “We’re already working to develop a medical engineering certificate program. We’re very interested in supporting trained entrepreneurs whose future leadership has the power to profoundly benefit the practice of medicine.”

But the real success, Jenson believes, will be found in the work of the physicians trained in the school.

“The greatest accolade we can receive will be when local families say of our doctors, ‘I want them to take care of me and my family,’” Jenson said.

The first class of WMU medical students began their studies in August. Although more than 3,500 applications were received, only 54 students were chosen to be part of the school’s inaugural class.

“They come from all over the country and have strong, diverse academic backgrounds,” Jenson said. “We used a holistic model to select applicants based on their academics, past experiences, and personal attributes.”

These students are reportedly astonished and pleased by the community’s response to their arrival.

“Local vendors have put out signs to welcome them,” Jenson said. “And when they are introduced, our neighbors are thrilled to recognize they have a WMU medical student in their midst. The students eat it up – they know they’ll be make a big difference in our region, and are pleased to be welcomed so warmly.”

The author is a Michigan based freelance writer.