

Christine Candio

Former ACHE chair Christine Candio charts a nimble, independent course for St. Luke's Hospital



In the St. Louis area, St. Luke's Hospital is the only independent hospital – and President and CEO Christine Candio is OK with that.

"I have always believed there is a place for independent organizations," she says. "The differentiator for St. Luke's is it is a large, advanced community hospital, and we have a strong network of care throughout two counties. That makes a difference. We have the entire continuum of care – including our own skilled nursing facility."

But that doesn't mean St. Luke's isolates itself, Candio notes.

"We are collaborators, which enables us to continue enhancing the services we provide our patients to improve the health of the community. St. Luke's is the exclusive St. Louis affiliate of Cleveland Clinic's Sydell and Arnold Miller Family Heart & Vascular Institute, which we're very proud of," she says. "We also continue to expand our imaging services through a partnership. And St. Luke's Rehabilitation Hospital

is a joint venture with Kindred Healthcare. We are also starting to belong to different clinically integrated networks."

Having said that, Candio admits that independent hospitals need to regularly evaluate themselves and their objectives.

"There are some key questions that independent organizations need to continually reflect on, and we do that here," she says. "Do

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you have the essentials to remain independent? I believe we do. Do you have collaborations and partnerships? Yes. Are you trying to be all things to all people? No, we're not."

Being independent, says Candio, keeps the organization flexible, a point she lightens with a reference to a couple nostalgic Claymation

characters from TV.

"We best serve our patients being nimble and responsive to our community's needs," she says. "You have to be like Gumby and Pokey – bendable and pliable. We have that here."

As the former board chair of the American College of Healthcare Executives, Candio has been a national leader among her peers for many years. She lived on the East

Coast most of her life but found the opportunity at St. Luke's too good to pass up.

"First and foremost were the quality outcomes of the organization. That was key," she says. "The independence of the hospital was an attraction as well. I like to say that we are our own system with one hospital, and

our team member engagement is phenomenal. Each individual here is so committed to serving our patients and their families and caring about one another. We have exceptional medical professionals; the teamwork among them is stellar.”

Through her work at ACHE, Candio brought a national perspective to the organization. And national attention has followed.

St. Luke’s has the best safety score of any St. Louis-area hospital in *Consumer Reports’* ratings of U.S. hospitals.

“I do believe that, as a healthcare industry, we are always on a constant journey of improvement, and we have to focus on zero harm,” she says. “Human beings make mistakes. As leaders, we have to ensure that we have all the right systems in place and a strong platform for people to work effectively and safely. When

mistakes happen, we have to first look at where the process failed and go from there.”

St. Luke’s was already a strong and safe organization when she was appointed president and CEO in January 2015, she says. “But my philosophy is always, how can we get stronger and not rest on our laurels?”

Candio’s leadership is imbued with her early years of experience as a nurse and a nursing leader.

“To be an effective leader, you need to always keep an ear to the ground and an eye to the future,” she says. “I keep an ear to the ground through rounding with purpose – talking with our team members and our patients. It’s amazing what you learn when you take the time to do that.”

She also participates in monthly meetings with a rotating group of about 20 staff members in

nonmanagerial roles to update them about what is going on at St. Luke’s and to provide an open forum for feedback. She tries to travel to all of St. Luke’s locations in the sprawling St. Louis metropolis as well.

Like many clinicians turned leaders, Candio says she moved into administration because she wanted to have a positive impact on a broader population of people. Her own experience as a hospital patient as a child spurred her desire to serve. She was even what was then called a “candy striper” hospital volunteer as a youth. The influence of those years has not left her.

“We are honored to work in healthcare – it’s a blessing,” she says. “People are letting you into their lives during their most vulnerable times, and that is a sacred honor. That has always touched me.” **MPI**

Cheering on the home team

Christine Candio’s biggest adjustment in St. Louis has nothing to do with healthcare.

It has to do with setting aside a place in her heart for a sports team besides the Boston Red Sox.

When she was jokingly asked at the end of her St. Luke’s job interview, “What’s your favorite baseball team,” the words, “Boston Red Sox” passed her lips before she even had time to think.

Some in the room looked surprised. Candio closed her portfolio and joked, “Well, I guess this interview is over.”

So, when she and her husband were picked up for dinner that evening by the physician who had asked the question, two St. Louis Cardinals caps were waiting for them in the back seat.

“It was priceless,” she says. “I do root for the home team now.”