

# **Interfaith Medical Center : *A History of Triumph***

## **Prominence**

The history of a hospital cannot be accurately told by merely recording events in a chronological order. Dates and events alone do not reflect the devotion and dedication of a hospital to the communities that it serves. The Interfaith Medical Center which is comprised of the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center (once the largest voluntary health facility in the borough) and the St. John's Episcopal Hospital, is an institution that is proud that its history is replete with noble and humane deeds, which has earned both hospitals a reputation for leadership and responsiveness to the communities needs.

A hospital is born out of the need to fill a void in healthcare within a particular community. When a city, a borough or even a neighborhood finds a significant increase in its population, the need for a health facility is illuminated. It becomes essential that a health facility be established to meet the healthcare needs of the ever-expanding populace. Such was the case in the late 19th century when a vast number of immigrants who had settled on Manhattans Lower East Side began streaming into Brooklyn to make their home.

The marked growth in the borough's population at the turn of the century and the heightened medical needs of these new residents prompted a group of dedicated, civic-minded citizens to open a small dispensary at 70 Johnson Street in 1895. This became the first site of what was to become the Jewish Hospital Society of Brooklyn.

About 50 years earlier the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island established the St. John's Episcopal Home for the Aged and the Blind on Herkimer Street in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

Within a few years the inadequacy of these initial health facilities became apparent, two complete hospital would be required to meet the myriad of medical needs of the community's residents. The Jewish Hospital Society of Brooklyn was officially incorporated on November 11th 1901. However, it was not until December 9th 1906 that the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn was dedicated.

Unfortunately, due to misplacement of the historical artifacts the official dates for the dedication and incorporations of the St. John's Episcopal Hospital are unknown. However, it has been well documented that this hospital has been providing health services to the residents of Central Brooklyn for over 140 years. It must also be noted that prior to the merger of the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center and the St. John's Episcopal Hospital in 1982 there was no affiliation, both were independent hospitals.

During its years of prominence, in an average year the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Centers Research Committee approved 29 manuscripts for publication in professional

journals, 13 of these publications were presented before various societies, approvals were given for the registration of 25 research projects and various members of the medical staff gave lectures throughout the United States and abroad. By today's standards the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center would be one of the preeminent health facilities in the nation.

The past prominence and reputation of this institution has been well documented, as this was the health facility that fame scientist Albert Einstein chose for surgery in the early 1950's.

### **Decline**

After World War II many of Central Brooklyn's European residents left for New York City's surrounding suburbs, leaving the area to African Americans and Hispanics. The stature and the esteemed reputation of the St. John's Episcopal Hospital and the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center began to decline as their finances deteriorated. The increased burden of taking care of more a medically indigent patient population became overwhelming for both institutions.

In 1979 Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center after many years of financial instability filed for reorganization in federal bankruptcy court to avoid being closed. St. John's Episcopal Hospital was not very far away from a similar fate. However, through a broad-based community effort and with help from then New York State Governor Hugh Carey, the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center received a \$14 million grant from then President Carter's administration to settle its debts. During this period Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center and the St. John's Episcopal Hospital were Central Brooklyn's largest employers with over 4,000 employees. Closing anyone of these institutions would have been catastrophic for the employees and their families. Had the hospitals been forced to close not only would the delivery of essential health services be severely affected, but also the already devastated economic stability of the community would have been exacerbated.

In late 1982 Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center merged with nearby St. John's Episcopal Hospital. When combined as Interfaith Medical Center the two institutions shed 300 beds and laid off 800 workers. After the merger Interfaith Medical Center continued to struggle financially. The new administration had the difficult task of getting the employee unions to work amicably with them. In 1985 Interfaith's medical residents went on a two- week strike over disputed wages and long hours of work. This was the longest such strike in the U.S. history.

Despite mounting financial problems, hospital officials and the community residents believed in the vitality of the institution. They willed the hospital to survive during these difficult times brought on by operating fund deficits, annual losses coupled with major equipment purchase. These financial difficulties were further compounded by delays in payment from state and federal healthcare reimbursement agencies.

In spite of the financial problems, the superb quality of medical care that had been a staple at both institutions prior to merger remained. However, cutbacks and financial stipulations began to affect research and teaching programs. In addition, the close interrelations of the various hospital departments began to gradually erode. Ironically, many of the community residents who had fought hard for the hospital to remain in this community began seeking health services elsewhere because the hospital's facilities were deteriorating.

An example of the deterioration that has taken place at Interfaith Medical Center is the out patient clinic building, located on the corner of Prospect Place and Classon Ave, this building is unquestionably one of the busiest and oldest buildings in the hospital. Because this building is obsolete and beyond repair, the clinic staff frequently must work under arduous conditions and it is a tribute to their skill that this clinic functions with such remarkable efficiency.

### **Resurgence**

Cognizant of the fact that preventive medicine is playing an ever-increasing role in ambulatory care, the hospital plans to replace the existing out patient building and in its place erect a new three story modern structure that will be geared towards meeting the demands of a competent and comprehensive healthcare institution. This new building is currently under construction and the expected date of completion and occupancy is November 2000.

When involved in business it is beneficial that one be able to demonstrate adaptability and undergo progressive changes. In order to keep pace of the indisputable progress being made by medical science, and be able to offer the community the highest caliber of healthcare, a hospital must out of necessity be in constant transition. This realization was the motivating factor when in mid 90's the New York State Dormitory Authority began auctioning public bonds for the construction of health facilities throughout the state. Interfaith Medical Center was one of several health facilities, for whom bonds were sold for the construction of new facilities.

In 1997 \$148.5 million was appropriated for a 4-phase construction of new facilities for Interfaith Medical Center. The first phase was the construction of a new emergency department on the St. John's Episcopal hospital's campus and Atlantic Ave. The new emergency department was completed in the spring 2000. The second phase of the new beginning project is the construction of the new out patient clinic building on Prospect Place across the street from the Brooklyn Jewish Medical Center's campus. Which as noted previously will be completed by November.

In addition to the construction of the new out patient clinic building, three new satellite clinics will be built in various locations throughout the borough. The third phase of the construction project was the demolition of the St. John's division's clinic building, which was adjacent to the new emergency department on Atlantic Ave. Also during this third phase renovations are underway on all of the Hospital floors at the St. John's

campus. The fourth and final phase of the construction project is the new four-story addition to the St. John's hospital's campus. The State Department of Health has approved the new facility to house 193 beds. However, recently Interfaith has resubmitted a proposal to modify the number beds to 287. Upon completion of this new facility Interfaith Medical Center will no longer be housed on two campuses. The entire hospital will move from the Brooklyn Jewish campus to the St. John's campus. The hospital's administration is currently reviewing the possible uses for the Brooklyn Jewish building. It will either be converted to a nursing home or a homeless shelter.

The \$148.5 million that has been appropriated by the New York State Dormitory Authority in addition to being used for the 4 phase construction project, will also be used for the repayment of outstanding debts, -4 engineering, architectural and inspection fees. Purchasing of new equipment and furniture are also included in the construction budget. According to Mr. Oliver Cutijar Interfaith's executive overseeing the constructing of the new facilities "only about 80 million of the funds will actually be used for the construction of the new facilities". The bonds secured to construct these new facilities are similar to house a mortgage or loan, Interfaith has 30 years to pay it back.

The work of most healthcare institutions like life itself is characterized never finished. Health institutions hold in their hands the lives and careers of thousands of people. This is an awesome responsibility.

As the entire staff of Interfaith Medical Center looks to the future with confidence and pride, the hope is to expand the educational activities of the institution in order to help provide the communities residents, with superb medical talent and services. An additional focus will be to intensify the hospitals research efforts with aim towards remedies and cures for man's dreaded diseases. With an adopted slogan of "**A New Beginning**" the staff of Interfaith Medical Center has accepted the challenge of rectifying it's deficiencies, thus providing the residents of Central Brooklyn with the best possible health services with respect, dignity and devotion.

The bonds are being marketed under the State's Secured Hospital Revenue Bond Program, established in 1985. Hospitals in the program have been deemed essential by State Health Department to the provision of health care services to medically under-served communities, providing a disproportionate share of services to uninsured or indigent patients and demonstrating severe financial distress. Such hospitals are eligible for financial support for capital projects through issuance of Secured Hospital Revenue Bonds secured by hospital revenues, specified debt service reserves and, lastly, a State service contract to ensure debt service is paid.

Under the Health Care Reform Act of 1996, which took effect January 1, 1997, the Secured Hospital Revenue Bond Program expires March 1, 1998, as part of the transition of the hospital industry from State-set reimbursement rates to deregulated rates set by market forces through negotiations between hospitals and insurers. Outstanding bonds will not be affected by the sunset of the Program, but no new bonds can be issued after March 1. The bonds sales today will be closed by February 27 to comply with the law.

"Refinancing high-interest debt and providing low-cost capital financing will help these hospitals compete in the deregulated market as the secured hospital program sunsets," said Dormitory Authority Board Chairman Thomas J. Murphy. "The savings achieved for these hospitals are significant."