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Rich Liekweg, Barnes-Jewish Hospital president and BJC group president, holds up a copy of a 1956 St. Louis Light announcing the opening of the newest portion of the Jewish Hospital of St. Louis. Liekweg spoke at the May 8 reunion celebration for former Jewish Hospital staff, as the Campus Renewal Project begins. | Photo by Brad Lechner
Event celebrates memories with hugs, tears  

by Andy Knef

BJH Many of the buildings that housed the former Jewish Hospital of St. Louis will soon give way to the future renewal of the campus. But the memories and legacy of healing live on in the hearts of the people who worked there. Many of them were on hand May 8 for a celebration hosted by Barnes-Jewish Hospital.

It was an event offering Jewish Hospital alumni a chance to reminisce about the care and training provided within the walls of the hospital, founded in 1902. About 250 people, including many former nursing students and hospital staff, enjoyed a reunion-type atmosphere, hors d’oeuvres and a healthy helping of hugs. A video booth was set up to capture memories and stories from those in attendance. Reprints from The Jewish Light marking the 1956 opening of the Kingshighway lobby were distributed as gifts.

In his remarks, Rich Liekweg, BJH president and BJC group president, thanked attendees for honoring BJH’s past and looking to the future as the hospital begins the first phase of campus renewal. “I recognize this is a bittersweet moment for many of you who began your career at Jewish Hospital or attended nursing school at the Jewish College of Nursing,” he said. “Some of you even met your spouses right here in these hallways. While we understand the need to update our facility, we want to pause and remember the people who cared for the patients here — the doctors, nurses and support staff who made this a special place.”

Bill Peck, MD, former executive vice chancellor of medical affairs and dean of Washington University School of Medicine until 2003, is one of those physicians who called Jewish Hospital home. He was a resident and fellow at Barnes Hospital in the 60s and returned in 1976 as the physician-in-chief at the Jewish Hospital of St. Louis and professor and co-chair of the Washington University department of medicine. Dr. Peck recalled the hospital’s national standing in research, education and patient care. “Nursing, under Brenda Ernst, was among the best in the nation,” he added. Dr. Peck and Karen Bess, current Goldfarb School of Nursing instructor and former Jewish College of Nursing student and Jewish Hospital staff nurse, cited the nursing school as a national model for developing highly trained, compassionate caregivers. Bess did, in fact, meet her husband at Jewish Hospital.

Former Jewish Hospital board chairman John Dubinsky put the hospital in historical and cultural context. “The mission of the Jewish Hospital was to afforde medical and surgical care and nursing to sick or disabled persons of any creed or nationality — and we are still living the mission at BJH,” he said. “At a time when Jewish patients and Jewish doctors could not receive care or become educated at other hospitals, Jewish Hospital opened its doors to all. That is a tremendous legacy that still lives today at BJH.”

In campus renewal plans, BJH officials will recognize donors and historic items by:

• ensuring architects integrate cornerstones and other historic elements
• incorporating bricks from Jewish Hospital and the Jewish Hospital College of Nursing into campus memorials, such as pathways, fountains or garden areas
• installing a digital donor recognition wall at both the north and south campus

Visit BJCnet for additional remembrances about the former Jewish Hospital.

Andy Knef, aknef@bjc.org

Jewish Hospital “firsts”

• The hospital’s training school for nurses graduated its first class in 1905.
• Its notable features included an audible nurse call system with speakers in each patient room, open-air balconies for treating patients with tuberculosis and state-of-the-art operating rooms.
• Jewish Hospital was the first to treat tumors at or near the skin surface with a combination of hypothermia and radiation treatments. It became the region’s first multidisciplinary center for the treatment of breast, colorectal, lymphoma, thoracic and head-and-neck cancers.
• Jewish Hospital’s tradition of care extended to its own staff. It was the first hospital in the city to adopt a 40-hour work week for its employees and offer them Social Security.
• Jewish Hospital was a major training center for African-American physicians in conjunction with Homer G. Phillips Hospital and was the first hospital in the city to fully integrate patient wards.