

## Rio Grande Hospital Celebrates 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and 10 Years of “Keeping the Dream Alive”

The Rio Grande Hospital foundation launched their 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Fundraising event, Keeping the Dream Alive, on Saturday night for a packed house, or rather a packed bus barn, with about 400+ people in attendance. Dinner was provided, as it has been for the past 10 years, by Ron and Glenda Martinez of Mountain View Restaurant in Monte Vista. They served Brisket, Pork and numerous sides. Lemonade was provided by the Del Norte Rotary. CEO Arlene Harms began the program by thanking the event’s sponsors for honoring Dr. Haug’s dream: Eagle Air Med, SLV Federal Bank, Community Banks of Colorado, Del Norte Bank, Cheryl and Rick Santi, Rio Grande Savings & Loan, Centura Health, and of course Mountain View Restaurant.

She went on to thank the many people responsible for organizing the event, including Bonnie Asplin, the foundation director, the Rio Grande Hospital Board Members, Medical Staff and Providers. Those who donated \$1,000 or more would be thanked with a gift basket made by Marilyn Davey, of Shades, Quilts & Etc. in Monte Vista. She concluded her thanks by announcing that \$48,000 had been raised via donations that evening. Harms would refer often throughout the night to the “fairytale” that has come true by the hard work and dedication of the community members and hospital staff in keeping the hospital open and expanding.

To honor the Hospital’s 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the event program focused largely on the history of the hospital and the immense contributions that the community had made throughout the years to keep it going and restart it when it was closed. CEO Arlene Harms was assisted in providing some history and anecdotes throughout the evening by Michael Curtis, Charles Ervin, Alan Davey, Nancy Schrader and Dr. Dale Berkbigler. They began by reminding the audience that the hospital was originally founded as a Sanitarium, or Tuberculosis Ward, in 1955 by the nuns of St. Joseph. The Sanitarium sign can still be found near the west entrance to the hospital. Unfortunately, the original CEO passed away of TB a year after its founding. Despite its status as the first hospital in the San Luis Valley, by the early 1990s, it was no longer financially viable and was closed in 1993.

It did not take long for the community of Del Norte, and the west end of the San Luis Valley, to start suffering from the lack of emergency medical services. Alan Davey testified to the significant need that the community felt, stating that hospital board then, including Larry Matrz and Jay Schrader, agreed that “People aren’t going to live around here unless we have a hospital.”

The presenters quoted an article from a September 1996 issue of the *Del Norte Prospector* that discussed the hospital board asking the Town of Del Norte for \$10,000 to add to their funds to restart the hospital. Stating that the board agreed and South Fork contributed about the same amount. Their major source of funding was also the \$50,000 they raised through community donations. Alan Davey fondly remembered how Dr. Haug “was always the councilor on how to make things work” when it came to funding and organizing the staff, even convincing the doctors to accept a “temporary deferment on getting paid” while they gathered the funding necessary to keep the hospital functional.

Dr. Dale Berkbigler discussed being recruited to work at the hospital when it was still St. Joseph’s, when he was still in medical school. One of the requirements was to spend 2 months of his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of medical

school in a small town, and he loved the challenges that rural healthcare presented. After graduation, he was recruited by the sisters of St. Joseph for 1 year, but knew that he wanted to stay within the first two months. He talked about how rural healthcare differed considerably from the “community of ‘ologists’ that are found in cities.” In cities, there are specialists available and often readily accessible for numerous different medical conditions and emergencies, whereas in rural areas, doctors are required to “handle it when it hits the door” no matter what kind of service the patient needs or whatever type of emergency comes in. He said that Rio Grande Hospital was the 1<sup>st</sup> to use a “clot buster” for heart attacks, “even before Alamosa” and said that hospital staff did everything, “stuff you wouldn’t believe we could do in a small hospital.” He also fondly remembered Dr. Haug, who he said “just showed up” when you needed him, you didn’t even have to ask him.

Nancy Schrader told the crowd about starting her career as a floor nurse that worked the night shift at St. Joseph’s, which also meant that she had to handle any and every problem that came in. She remembered that Sister Victor would help when they needed it. She laughed at the irony that the same board that closed the hospital in 1993 reopened it in 1996, because you simply “can’t live here without a hospital.” She remembered the difficult 6-9 months of fundraising that the board and staff did and how they used the “Golden Hour” to remind the community why healthcare here was important, referring to the limited time frame that someone in need of emergency care has to receive treatment to maintain an effective chance at recovering. She stated that they passed out pledge cards and about 20 individual people donated 5-10 thousand each on top of the smaller donations they received.

Although they were happy to have the hospital open again, the facility was in dire need of repairs. Arlene Harms pointed out that they started to look at expansion in 2002, but because all of the critical care hospitals had been built in the 1950s, it seemed unlikely that they would be able to find the funding and loans necessary to modernize the hospital. Michael Curtis remembered the facility, how the entrance was difficult to discern and how Dr. Haug’s office space was the Operating Room. When he asked Dr. Haug how he could function like that, Haug simply stated, “You’re too young to be a Vietnam Vet, aren’t you?” Haug directed Curtis’ attention to look at a poster with a quote by Margaret Mead that read: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Haug looked at Curtis and said “We’ve got a small group of committed souls and we’re here and you’re gonna help me.”

Charles Owen talked about Dr. Haug’s applications for a HUD loan for the hospital’s renovations. Haug asked 3 times, Owen described, and was told no for the first two. On the third one, Haug went to the HUD director who told him, “If people in Del Norte want healthcare, they should move to Denver.” Dr. Haug refused to leave town with that as an answer, and stayed until he could convince the director to give them the loan. Afterwards, someone joked that Dr. Haug should get a “HUD Forever” tattoo, to which he responded by rolling up his sleeve.

CEO Arlene Harms wrapped up the program by reminding those in attendance that Rio Grande Hospital was the 1<sup>st</sup> out the 345 hospitals previously closed in the state of Colorado to have reopened. She again emphasized that this fairytale would not have come true without the generosity of the donors. A PowerPoint presentation then showed the hospital in its various stages from its founding through the

modern clinics being built and opening, including the most recently opened Monte Vista Medical Clinic. Harms pointed out that the Monte Vista Clinic was built without any loans and used 95% local labor and local businesses' resources.

Harms then announced the exciting news that Rio Grande Hospital has plans to expand its Physical Therapy facilities, ER and conference room facilities, as well as create room for a new Cardiac Rehabilitation program. She pointed out that the Respiratory Therapists are "literally in a closet right now" and the building projects, funded partially through USDA loans, will give them more room and allow the hospital to bring in more specialists.

The event concluded with door prizes being distributed, which were themed gift baskets made by Paula Pacheco and the annual auction, with a wide variety of donated items that were sold for amounts ranging from roughly \$75 through well over \$1000. The items were donated by local businesses and individuals dedicated to the success and future expansion of the hospital and clinics.