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JUICING UP JEFF



Stephen Klasko, head of Thomas Jefferson University and Health System, in his office beside a portrait of Steve Jobs, one of his heroes and major influences. CHARLES FOX / Staff Photographer

President and CEO Stephen Klasko, a year into the job, is about nothing less than rebooting health care - starting with kinder, gentler doctors.

By Paul Jablow

Stephen Klasko hadn't been running the Thomas Jefferson University empire for long before his thoughts turned to Sidney Kimmel.

A Philadelphia native who became a billionaire in the fashion industry, Kimmel had given generously to Jefferson in the 1990s but not much since despite funding the performing arts center that bears his name.

But Klasko, who last month hit the one-year mark as university president and health system chief executive officer, knew Kimmel had built Jones New York by aggressively expanding and thinking outside the box. So his hunch was the two would get along. This turned out to be an understatement.

"We really connected on the vision of reimagining health care," Klasko said, recalling his April visit to Kimmel's Fifth Avenue penthouse above Central Park.

Two months later came the announcement that Kimmel had given Jefferson \$110 million, the fifth largest gift ever to a U.S. medical school. And Klasko was a big step closer to his goal of reinvention.

"Nobody's coming down from Mars to reinvent health care," says Klasko, 60. "Why not us?"

Klasko's vision includes:

- Decentralizing care away from large hospitals.
- Using more technology, especially telemedicine, to bring patients and

physicians together.

- Stressing emotional intelligence and social skills in picking med students.
- Emphasizing entrepreneurship, collaboration, and philanthropy to compensate for shrinking payments and research money.

Perhaps his most visible impact so far — hardly revolutionary — has been Jefferson's \$4.3 million purchase from SEPTA of naming rights for the old Market East station, virtually claiming a swath of Center City.

Yet inside the warren of buildings on Chestnut Street and — more significant, inside Klasko's head — the changes on the way are greater.

"We're going to change the DNA of health care one physician at a time,"

Continued on back page

“What we really needed were emotionally intelligent physicians, the ability to embrace change rather than to fight it”. – Stephen Klasko, CEO of Thomas Jefferson University

he said at a TED talk here in March.

Gathered in a conference room, 16 members of Jefferson’s incoming medical school class grazed on pepperoni pizza and heard Klasko describe how he had been rejected as an applicant at Temple’s medical school at age 19. It was hardly sour grapes. Klasko says he has talked to Temple recently about ways they and other local medical schools can cooperate, such as sharing preclinical courses that all students take.

Klasko sometimes describes his moves as responding to obvious trends. But he is also an admirer of hockey legend Wayne Gretzky, who said his success relied on reacting not to where the puck was but to where it would be.

He told the students he built the largest ob-gyn practice in the Allentown area in the 1980s simply by “really taking care of people,” emphasizing family histories, and talking to patients. Realizing that most hysterectomies are done by male doctors, he read up on how women often found them psychologically harmful and wrote a research paper on it.

He also said he was recently surprised to hear fellow physicians laughing at walk-in clinics started by drugstore chains until “they found they were getting their lunch eaten.”

Klasko said he started thinking about how a different type of physician was needed and put those ideas into practice in his nine years as dean of the University of South Florida medical school.

After years of choosing “competitive types” as medical students because they aced exams, he said at the TED talk, “we were amazed that docs weren’t more empathetic, communicative, and creative. As my kids would say, ‘Duh.’”

“What we really needed were emotionally intelligent physicians, the ability to embrace change rather than to fight it.”

So he began picking students for social skills and empathy as well as academic performance, and told the Jeff students they had been chosen the same way.

“We had joined a cult,” he said of the old system. “We squeezed the creativity out of people.”

As the lunch ended, Klasko rushed to a conference call to discuss an acquisition or merger — no one was saying exactly what. His slice of pepperoni pie remained untouched.

Probably the biggest surprise for him, Klasko said later that afternoon, has been that “a 190-year-old institution seems so excited” about new ideas.

Brian Sweeney, who started at Jefferson as a nurse 15 years ago and has risen to vice president for clinical and support services, says Klasko is “challenging us to be different.”

With economic challenges to care delivery and medical education, Sweeney says, having a president with both an M.D. (Hahnemann) and an MBA (Wharton) is reassuring.

Some of Klasko’s ideas reflect his desire to move care away from big hospitals. These include the satellite office that opened in August in Fairmount and an urgent-care and wellness center that will open on Washington Square in February.

Other ideas are more futuristic. Jefferson will start its telemedicine initiative next month by giving families of hospitalized patients a chance to participate in their care through “virtual rounds,” with patients, family, and caregiving teams interacting daily.

Judd Hollander, an ER doctor who heads the initiative, says it will then expand to giving post-operative patients the option of doing follow-up visits over telehealth. Around Thanksgiving, Jefferson will start offering remote visits for second opinions on a trial basis with specialists in women’s health.

Eventually, the hospital hopes to create a “virtual emergency room,” with remote communication, including test results, between community hospitals and Jefferson specialists. Klasko says he can see a time when 65 percent of patient “visits” to Jefferson would be virtual.

“Telehealth is not something the old Jeff would have done,” says Klasko, a slight and unassuming-looking man. He wears sunglasses that change shade based on the light, owns and flies his own Cessna 172, has about 128,000 songs in his iTunes library, and DJs as a hobby. His cellphone ring is Jethro Tull’s “Thick as a

Brick.”

In Florida, Klasko left behind a mix of the visionary and the obvious.

He started the “Stephen K. Klasko Institute for an Optimistic Future in Healthcare,” which bills itself online as a place where “ideas are born. Some are crazy. Some of them are impractical. But some of them just might become the answers to how we can help you become healthier.”

He also started an assessment center where physicians can demonstrate surgical and other skills using virtual reality. He calls it his answer to an obvious paradox: As a pilot, he has to periodically demonstrate his hands-on competence but as a physician, he doesn’t. Just a written test does it.

He says Jefferson is discussing collaboration on a similar center in Amman, Jordan, and may someday look into one in this area.

There have also been preliminary talks about a partnership with Abington Memorial Hospital. At Jefferson, Klasko is hiring staff for a new Center for Health Care Entrepreneurship, mission still to come. He also talks of a “telehealth academy” and about “creating courses for new [health] professions.”

“I want to be the most transparent president in history,” Klasko joked as he sat looking through the glass walls he had put in his office in the old Federal Reserve Bank Building at 925 Chestnut St. Despite his fascination with 21st-century technology, he has gone 20th century here in one way, forbidding intra-office e-mails when human contact is possible. Communication is something he stresses almost as much as technology: Communication among players in the health profession, between patients and physicians, and between hospitals and medical schools here.

In his TED talk, he spoke of “blending the strengths of our different institutions,” with common courses just a start.

“We need to get away from the model that each of us is a little island,” he said. “That’s what can really differentiate Philadelphia. My biggest competitor is other cities.”