Ruiz Leaves Mark on a Still-Growing Campus

By Tyler Smith

Tony Ruiz made a habit of forging new ground during an 18-plus-year career with UCH that officially concludes Jan. 3, 2014 with his retirement. He helped to plan and oversee construction of every University of Colorado Hospital facility on the Anschutz campus and was also a leader in the June 2007 move that completed the hospital’s transition from Ninth Avenue in Denver to the new location in Aurora. He served as Project Executive for the recent Anschutz Cancer Pavilion and Anschutz Inpatient Pavilion 2 projects, leading a team that brought the $400 million-plus jobs in ahead of schedule and on budget.

His years at Fitzsimons were eventful. The war in Vietnam escalated, and the United States sustained a growing number of deaths and casualties. From 1966 to 1971, Fitzsimons averaged about 100 amputees a year, and the number of orthopedic cases tripled in 1968, making for heavy radiologic caseloads.

Ruiz worked in Building 500, the main medical facility, which had been constructed in 1941, shortly before the country entered World War II. In the 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had recovered from a heart attack in a suite on the eighth floor. “It was a very exciting place,” Ruiz recalled.

After his discharge, Ruiz returned to Toledo, Ohio, to continue his career in radiology and later to move into hospital administration. In 1983, Ruiz eagerly accepted an opportunity to return to the Denver area, this time as director of diagnostic imaging for St. Joseph’s Hospital. But by then the Fitzsimons he remembered had largely vanished.

“What had been a vibrant community was getting ready to close,” he said.

Back to the roots. In July 1995, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommended shuttering Fitzsimons. But it was to enjoy a remarkable second act. Several years after he joined UCH as vice president of operations in 1995, Ruiz was among a relatively small group of far-sighted individuals who drafted the original master plans that transformed Fitzsimons from a decaying army base to a humming health care city known today as the Anschutz Medical Campus.
And in another career twist, Ruiz at one point found himself working again in Building 500 – but under far different circumstances than he had during his Army days, when he had been on the third floor in radiology.

As a hospital vice president, Ruiz had a first-floor office that had once been the working quarters for the commanding general, colonels and department chairs.

“As an enlisted man, I never went to that area,” Ruiz said. “Now I was officing there. I never thought I’d do that.”

**Back to Ohio.** It took Ruiz awhile to complete the circle that brought him back to the Fitzsimons site. He began his post-military career by returning to St. Vincent Hospital and Medical Center in Toledo, the same institution where he had completed his training in radiologic technology. He spent the next 14 years there, demonstrating leadership qualities – he rose to chief technologist in the Radiology Department – and a desire to expand his skill set.

He picked up a bachelor’s degree in Organizational Development in 1976 and an MBA in Health Care Administration in 1979, both from the University of Toledo, as he branched out to a number of new areas, including process improvement, employee relations, and recruitment.

“My goal was to get as much experience in hospital management as I could get, and moving into these jobs was a way to do it,” he said.

**Soaking up knowledge.** The years at St. Joseph’s provided another breakthrough. After three years directing the Diagnostic Imaging Department, Ruiz was offered the vice presidency of Clinical and Support Services in 1986. The job introduced him to vast new areas of hospital operations – from the clinical lab and the blood bank to food and nutrition to pharmacy to parking to property acquisition and many areas in between.

He used the experience to soak up every bit of knowledge he could. “What I learned,” he said, “is how important it is to know and work with individuals who are not in a leadership position. I learned by working through the ranks. I am more comfortable working with and learning from first-line employees in any department than I am in sitting through countless meetings.”

He left Saint Joseph Hospital in 1994, and after trying consulting for a year, joined UCH as Vice President of Operations. He was not responsible initially for construction, but was later asked by then Chief Operating Officer Joyce Cashman to oversee completion of the Critical Care Tower at the Ninth Avenue Campus in 1996.

**Center of controversy.** Meanwhile, the hospital’s efforts to expand the Ninth Avenue campus ran into opposition from neighborhood groups. The impasse eventually led to then President and CEO Dennis Brimhall and the late Vincent Fulginiti, MD, chancellor of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, spearheading discussions with the U.S. Department of Education, Department of Defense and the city of Aurora to move the hospital to the Fitzsimons base, which was slated to close for good in 1999.

Ruiz was on an executive team that drafted the master plan for a campus at Fitzsimons that would one day be home to UCH, the CU Health Sciences Center and Children’s Hospital (now Children’s Hospital Colorado). The discussions progressed amidst a chorus of dissent.

“There were groups saying the move was crazy,” Ruiz recalled. “We kept hearing that it would never work. But I have learned throughout my career that you don’t say ‘no’ to an idea until you’ve tested it and you know it won’t work. Otherwise, you’re not being fair to yourself or to the idea.”

**Footprint of the future.** There were ideas that died on the drawing board, such as the one that would have placed the Cancer Pavilion east of Building 500. The team finally settled on creating clinical,
research and education “zones,” with the clinical and research areas adjacent to one another. Thus the two research complexes that now stand are in close proximity to the Anschutz Cancer, Outpatient and Inpatient pavilions. The group also contemplated a user-friendly, pedestrian campus that would preserve as much natural green space as possible. Building 500, the repository of so much history, would be the campus centerpiece.

The campus got its name in 2006 in honor of the $91 million in donations made by the Anschutz Foundation to help build many of its now-familiar landmarks.

Moving experience. Strained by the expense of operating facilities in both Aurora and Denver, the hospital finally cut its cord to Ninth Avenue for good on June 17, 2007, moving patients and hundreds of employees in a massive operation that Ruiz was instrumental in choreographing.

“The most exciting thing was that we moved all of the patients, including the babies in the NICU, safely to Aurora,” Ruiz said. The culmination of months of planning and sweating thousands of details finally hit home when he walked the halls of the empty Ninth Avenue hospital with Bruce Schroffel and Colleen Goode, then the hospital’s president and CEO and chief nursing officer, respectively.

“We walked through the building and campus and there was no one there,” Ruiz recalled. “We said, ‘We did it.’”

On to the next. Not quite three years later, the UCH Board of Directors gave the go-ahead for construction of a second tower and a new Emergency Department, launching Ruiz’s career capper. By any standards, the construction schedule for a 12-story tower with an ED more than double the size of the original was aggressive.

The hospital announced its expansion plans at a May 2010 news conference, broke ground on the project a year later and took just over two more years to wrap up the openings of the new ED, four ORs, pre- and post-procedural cardiovascular areas, three ICUs, and two med/surg units during a two-month stretch that started April 7 and ended June 8 of this year. Those openings came five weeks earlier than originally planned because of the hospital’s persistently heavy patient volumes.

And along the way, Ruiz and his team oversaw construction of a new, 2,460-space employee/faculty parking garage, a 662-space patient/visitor parking garage and numerous smaller moves, while it juggled deadlines, change orders, temporary staff relocations and space closures, and technical tests to ensure units were ready to open, among many other tasks.

The success, Ruiz said, was the result of a simple formula: the greater the number of tasks at hand, the harder you work. A stickler for details, he acknowledges he can be difficult to work for.

“All through my career I’ve felt we needed to challenge ourselves to do something better,” Ruiz said. “If someone tells me we need two years to do a job, I says let’s do it in a year and nine months. If we have a $2 million project, let’s do the job for $1.7 million.”

He added that his high expectations extended to his own work.

“I never ask anyone to do more than I ask of myself,” he said. “And I’ve been fortunate to work with people who have bought in, people who have pushed themselves.”

He’s most grateful for the working relationships he formed across a nearly five-decade career—many of them during his years in the Denver area. He notes valuable insights from Sister Mary Andrew Talle and David Reeb, who were CEOs of Saint Joseph Hospital while he worked there, as well as Brimhall, Cashman, Schroffel and current UCH President and CEO John Harney.

“During my years at University of Colorado Hospital, I’ve had an opportunity to meet and work with some of the best people in health care—in all positions, clinical and non-clinical, from entry-
level jobs to administration and faculty," Ruiz said. "My career wouldn’t have been the same if I’d stayed in Toledo. I’ll miss coming to the hospital and seeing the people I’ve worked with for so many years. During the wonderful times and the difficult times, we always worked together and always came through."

Tower Team

Tony Ruiz credits a tight team for the successful construction and ahead-of-schedule opening of AIP 2:

» Tom Davis, Facilities
» Kathy Deanda, IT
» Diane Haney, Capital and Purchasing
» Renae Kindle, Capital and Purchasing
» Sean Menogan, Project Management
» Garrett Miller, Accounting
» Kelly O’Connor, IT
» Ashley Payne, Administration
» Harry Pompeian, Project Management
» Catherine Reeves, Project Management
» Eric Roark, Compliance