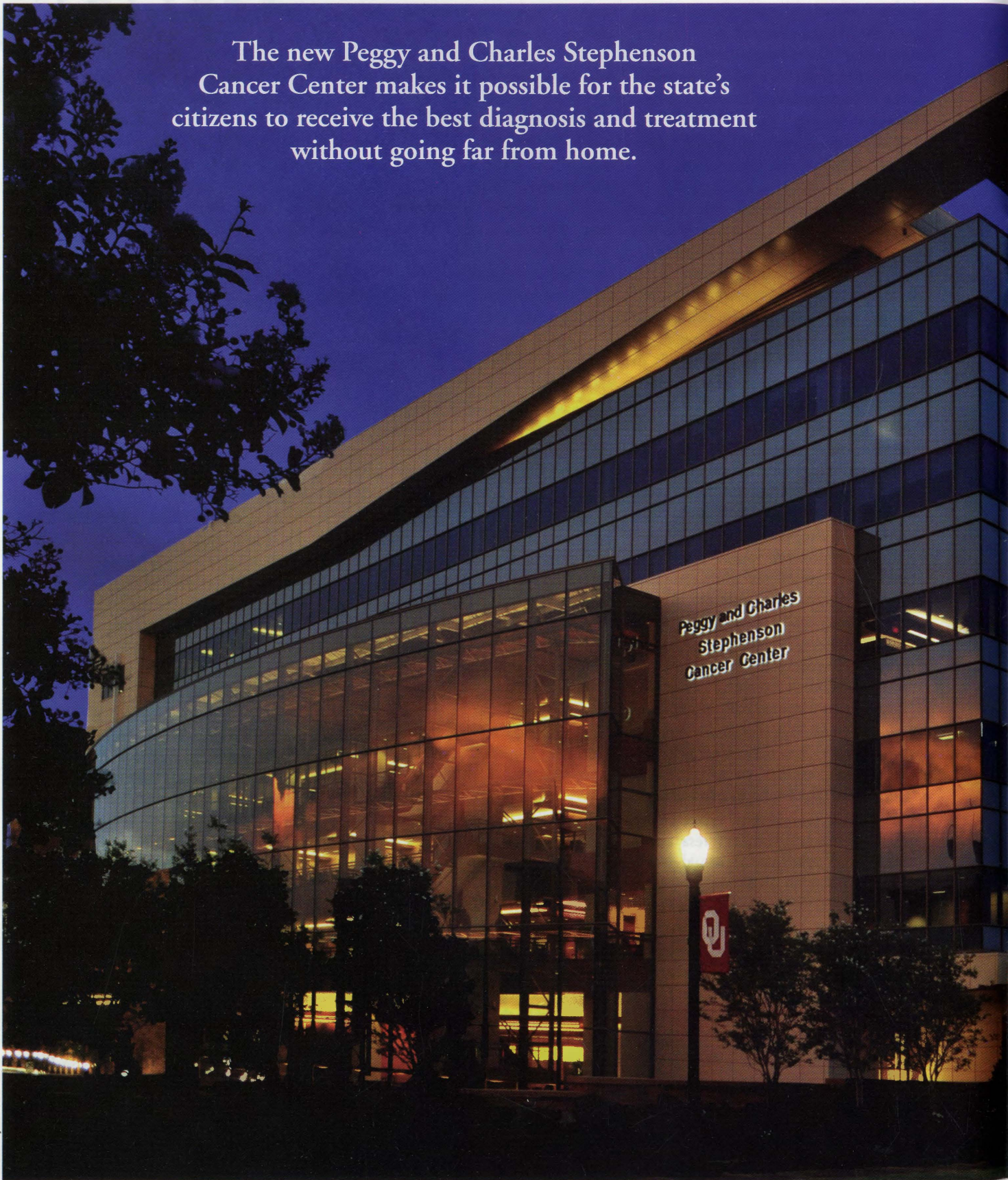


The new Peggy and Charles Stephenson
Cancer Center makes it possible for the state's
citizens to receive the best diagnosis and treatment
without going far from home.



Robert Taylor



Taking Care of Our Own

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Andrea Wilcoxon knew her son, Jimmy, was under a lot of stress studying for the LSAT, so she did not want to bother him until he had finished the test one Saturday morning in October 2008. When she called that afternoon, the OU senior told her he had made it through despite a fever that had been dogging him for days.

“And I just don’t understand—I have all these little blue spots all over my arms and legs, and I have a really bad bruise under my arm,” he added.

“I wasn’t too alarmed,” the Muskogee mother says wryly. “I have four children, and you don’t overreact to anything.” She assumed that her son had caught the flu and encouraged him to go to the emergency room if his symptoms worsened. Jimmy soon called to say he had decided to do just that.

Within hours, Andrea got another phone call, this time from an oncologist at Norman Regional Hospital.

“I can’t be 100 percent sure because we haven’t done all the tests yet,” the doctor said, “but I am almost positive that Jimmy has leukemia.”

continued

Anationally recognized cancer center built by Oklahomans for Oklahomans. That was the charge given to the University of Oklahoma by the Oklahoma State Legislature in 2001. A decade and nearly \$160 million later, the Peggy and Charles Stephenson Cancer Center at the University of Oklahoma opened its doors to patients in July.

The facility was built with more than \$90 million in state funds, primarily from tobacco tax revenues and approximately \$25 million from the University Hospitals Authority and Trust. Some \$40 million in private donations also have been raised, including the naming gift from the Stephensons. Other major gifts have come from the Noble Foundation; the Gaylord, Everest and Bennett families; the Rainbolt family; the Records family; Nancy Moore; Carl B. Anderson III; the Inasmuch Foundation; the Chickasaw Nation; and the Presbyterian Health Foundation.

The Stephenson Cancer Center, with branch facilities at OU-Tulsa's Schusterman Clinic and the Tisdale Specialty Clinic, is devoted to patient-centered, interdisciplinary care for people throughout the state and region. Its role is unique in Oklahoma health care.

Director Robert S. Mannel, M.D., is quick to point out that good cancer care is available in hospitals and clinics across Oklahoma. But the scope of the state's only academic cancer center is much broader—and deservedly so.

Some 1.5 million Oklahomans will develop cancer in their lifetime—one out of three women and one out of two men. Thirty-five percent of Oklahomans who currently have cancer will die of the disease in 2011.

"What a cancer center does is to say, 'That's not acceptable,'" Mannel explains. "It becomes the place to change the way we manage cancer so we will have better success in the future." Success is targeted through a combination of cutting-edge patient care, research, clinical trials, prevention, education and health care policy.

"The goal is to elevate the level of cancer care for all the citizens of Oklahoma."

The Cancer Center's own elevation began with a vision focused firmly on patients. Everything in the seven-story, 210,000-square-foot facility was built from the foundation up with the idea of bringing experts to the patient in a "one appointment, one location, one day" model of care.

What that means is patients at the Stephenson Cancer Center do not have to hop from building to building or lab to office and back again. Instead, an interdisciplinary team made up of everyone from oncologists to social workers to surgeons can gather around the patient in one meeting space to develop a comprehensive diagnosis and treatment plan. A wide variety of resources ranging from nutrition to finances, chemotherapy to spiritual counseling can all be brought to bear in a single spot.



Robert Taylor

Form integrates beautifully with function in every aspect of the Stephenson Cancer Center. Open floors, natural light and rich textures create a positive atmosphere for patients and staff alike.

"We're going to be with you as you fight through this cancer," Mannel says.

From the moment patients walk into the center, each detail they encounter has been designed with them in mind. Many patients have commented that they feel that they are entering a five-star hotel instead of a medical clinic. Creating a beautiful and healing environment was the aim of OU First Lady Molly Shi Boren, who spent many hours working with other members of the Health Sciences Center team, including site coordinator Paul Manzelli, to accomplish that goal.

Large windows let sunlight pour in. Soothing natural colors and materials and modern furnishings with simple lines greet pa-



Families and friends of patients have compared the living area of the Stephenson Cancer Center to that of a five-star hotel. In addition to comfortable seating, visitors have access to a small library, restaurant and even amenities like board games and decks of cards on the tables.

tients and their families. More than 100 original paintings were donated to the center by the late Roger Sprague, a 1962 OU fine arts graduate and noted Santa Fe artist whose works were collected by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and many others.

The hub of the first floor is the center's living room, which features a baby grand piano, and the Healthy Hearth, a café offering gourmet sandwiches, brick-oven pizzas, salads, pastas, hormone-free meats and eggs, homemade bakery items, ice cream and Starbucks coffees. Patrons can enjoy their meal either at restaurant

scope at the OU Health Sciences Center.

"All these things are there for a purpose," Mannel says. "As physician scientists, we can really get focused on the scientific side of battling cancer. But we've learned that is just one area where the battle is being waged. The patient's mind and spirit have to be addressed as well. Studies have shown it makes a difference in survival."

He adds that the Healing Garden benefits caregivers and support staff as well. "They all get very attached to our patients and

families. This is an emotional journey, and not just for the patient."

The journey begins upstairs on the Cancer Center's two floors of clinics. Once again, details are focused on pa-

tients and their families. Central waiting areas are furnished with comfortable, simple furniture—including rocking chairs—and bookcases are packed with titles hand-selected by OU students at the Oklahoma City Friends of the Library Annual Book Sale. Mrs. Boren personally gave each of the students a budget to purchase the books.

Behind the waiting area are hallways filled with examination rooms designed to accommodate not only doctors and patients, but also family members standing by for information and support.

"When you're battling cancer, whole families are involved," Mannel emphasizes.

Earthy greens, blues, reds and yellows were selected to soften exam rooms, and stenciled borders with words of inspiration give

"The goal is to elevate the level of cancer care for all the citizens of Oklahoma."

seating or a high countertop facing individual video screens.

Dave Annis, director of housing and food services at the University, provided the basic vision for the Healthy Hearth. The staff call themselves the culinary care team, echoing a theme of those who work at the center: "Everyone is a caregiver."

To the left of the café is a patient resources center staffed by a full-time librarian who can point families toward books, videos, pamphlets and reputable online sources that will give them the information they need to face cancer.

Also nearby is a comfortable family lounge with children's toys and videos and a posh, modern salon staffed by trained consultants who can fit cancer patients with wigs. Assistance with breast prosthesis is available on the third floor.

the eye somewhere to rest. Music is piped in but can either be turned down or completely off as patients wish. In a small but important detail, medical instruments are hidden behind wooden cabinets so that patients do not have to sit and stare at them while waiting.

Across the hall from examination rooms is a comfortable meeting space with warm, intimate lighting where patients and their care team can gather.

Gathering space also was the concept behind the Cancer Center's chemotherapy floor, which was designed with the understanding patients often develop friendships that become lifelines of support.

Sometimes these friendships bloom into larger "communities," Mannel says, relating that groups of patients frequently ask to schedule their chemotherapy at the same time. On the other end of the spectrum, patients may want privacy or feel too unwell to visit with others.

To accommodate these realities, the Cancer Center's chemotherapy floor can treat up to 60 patients in one large space that features three flowing levels of community. Small, curtained areas feature video and laptop capability and allow patients to be alone with their family. Mid-sized and large "community rooms" let patients socialize with others receiving treatment. Patients and family can order food by iPad from the Healthy Hearth café downstairs. A few feet away is an onsite pharmacy with a full-time chemotherapy specialist.

Downstairs in the lab, radiation therapy is available. Soon equipment for proton therapy will be installed, which will make the center one of the few in the nation to couple the latest in all technological areas with the strength of academic medicine. The radiation area has natural light flowing into the waiting areas and is decorated by a 10-by-20-foot mural by noted Cherokee artist Virginia Stroud.

Mannel makes no attempt to hide his enthusiasm as he walks down the hall to a space that sets the Peggy and Charles Stephenson Cancer Center apart from all others in the state—the Phase I Clinical Trials Area. Before drugs are approved by the FDA, they must undergo a highly structured, multi-year testing process. The most promising drugs make their first step beyond the laboratory as Phase I human trials. The Cancer Center is Oklahoma's only Phase I center.

"What this does is allow us to bring to Oklahoma the newest, latest and most exciting drugs," Mannel explains. "Previously, if



Robert Taylor

Jari Askins, associate provost for external relations at OUHSC, and Wade Williams, associate director, research administration, examine educational materials in one of the center's common areas.

you were an Oklahoma patient who had failed standard therapy and you wanted to keep fighting your cancer, you had to leave the state. This is a state of 3.7 million people, so there are a lot of people here that impacts."

Because Phase I drugs are so new, clinical trial patients have special needs. Patients may be monitored for up to 12 hours at a time in comfortable areas where they can recline or in private rooms with beds. Mannel describes the clinic as "an intensive care unit for chemotherapy."

He points out that the center began clinical trials a year before the building was finished. The program already has more than 100 patients in its care. Within another year, Mannel believes the program's growth will make the Stephenson Cancer Center among the top 10 Phase I centers in the nation.

"There is a real lack of this type of therapy in the central part of the country," he says.

That lack, Mannel insists, has human consequences—in lost lives and uprooted families.

Jimmy Wilcoxon needed specialized treatment—and he needed it fast. Tests had revealed that the OU senior was suffering from Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, or ALL, which can literally appear overnight and be fatal within weeks.

While she and her husband, Jim, were still grappling with the shocking news, Andrea asked the oncologist where she would go if one of her own children had been diagnosed with ALL.

"I would go to M. D. Anderson," the doctor replied.

The next day, Jimmy was flown to Houston while his teary parents sped their way south. The 21-year-old immediately was entered into a clinical trial so he could access the most cutting-edge drugs.



The sculpture "Ten Big Standing Bronze Flowers" by James Surls greets visitors upon their arrival at the Stephenson Cancer Center.



Cheerful exam rooms with enough space for family members help patients relax and focus on information provided by the center's medical staff, like Kasey Little, PA-C, radiation oncology.

"Jimmy and I never left for the next 10 months," Andrea Wilcoxen says.

Family members arranged for an apartment where Andrea and Jim could stay. When Jim had to go back home to his job and their youngest child, Andrea stayed by herself for three weeks until Jimmy was declared to be in remission and could move in with her.

He began a rigorous chemotherapy regimen with side effects that sent him to the emergency room. Jimmy's treatment required lab work every other day. In one frightening incident, he developed a pneumonia that antibiotics could not touch and had to have part of his lung removed.

"He was in the hospital once a month or every other month," his mother remembers. "Things got scary, but then he would go home with me to the apartment."

Every chance he got, Jim Wilcoxen flew or drove the nine hours to Houston. Grandparents visited. Jimmy's OU friends came now and then. But mostly, it was just Andrea and Jimmy in an apartment 500 miles from home and family, going back and forth to the hospital for constant treatments and tests.

Remarkably, Andrea believes she and Jimmy had the easier end of the deal.

"The most difficult part for all of them was not being able to be close and seeing Jimmy, the worrying when you're away," she says of her family, which included her parents, a grown daughter, a second daughter in college and a son who was a senior in high school. Andrea kept everyone updated through an online blog service.

"That was a great thing, but it's just not the same as when you can be here and see him and know he's okay. That took a toll. It was hard."

Finances took a different toll. On top of medical bills, the Wilcoxens had to pay for an apartment and Jim's frequent travel to Houston on one income. Andrea had no choice but to quit her job as a physician recruiter.

Because of the support of family and friends and Jim's income as

an attorney, the Wilcoxens could manage the expense. Regardless, they would have made the same choices.

“You’re at the point that you do what you have to do—you don’t care if you sell or pawn everything that you have. You just do it,” Andrea says.

Money was the least of their worries.



Robert Taylor

Natural materials and original artwork, like the mural above by Cherokee artist Virginia Stroud, warm the interior of Oklahoma’s first comprehensive cancer center.

Not everyone is so fortunate. Director Mannel knows that many Oklahomans may not have the resources to even consider traveling to Houston or another Phase I center like The Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

“Oklahomans are already struggling,” he says. “We feel acutely the need to create for our citizens a resource place where they can know that they’re getting the same level of care, the same access to cutting-edge technology and drugs that they would anywhere else.”

Oklahomans agree. In addition to state funding, approximately 120 individuals made donations of \$10,000 or more for naming opportunities within the Cancer Center. Loved ones lost to cancer are honored with various spaces from examination rooms to nutrition centers.

“You don’t have to go very far to find somebody who’s passionate about cancer. That’s one of the most rewarding things to me about being a cancer physician—I’m constantly humbled by the passion and energy of the patients and the families as they fight the disease,” Mannel says.

Such passion transcends regional pride and rivalries. Former Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Jari Askins has taken on the role of marketing director for the Cancer Center. Her job includes building alliances between the Cancer Center and other health-care providers statewide, including Indian health clinics and the Oklahoma Department of Health. The Cancer Center also has collaborative research agreements with OU, Oklahoma State University, the University of Tulsa and the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation.

“The Cancer Center isn’t this building, it isn’t OU, it is a network,” Mannel stresses. “Good cancer care, good research, all those things are already here in Oklahoma. The revolution is making the commitment to bring it all into one location and making the statewide commitment to providing a cancer center that all Oklahomans can utilize. We’re going to have to focus around a statewide resource to get our arms around this disease.”



Robert Taylor

Research, education and treatment are the three core components of the Stephenson Cancer Center. The facility is the only one in the state to offer the breakthrough treatment of Phase I Clinical Trials.



Robert Taylor

Tranquility is a key element of Oklahoma's newest and most comprehensive cancer center. Falling water, fresh air and lush vegetation welcome visitors to the outdoor Healing Garden.



Steve Calahan

A small onsite chapel offers patients, their families and staff a quiet refuge for reflection and meditation during a busy day.

Within five years, Mannel expects that the Cancer Center will have received the ultimate seal of approval by becoming a National Cancer Institute designate. Only 66 NCI-designated centers exist in the United States.

“The Cancer Center isn't this building, it isn't OU, it is a network.”

“M. D. Anderson came from the same idea,” says Mannel, a native Texan who worked as a student researcher for that cancer center. “Treating cancer isn't just about one patient one day. It's about understanding the disease and moving forward.

“Trust me, the scalpels are no sharper there, the radiation equipment is no better. They have the same drugs. The difference is a perceived commitment to a broader mission against cancer. Over time we can demonstrate that we have the same level of care that patients can get anywhere else in the country.”

By August 2009,

doctors decided Jimmy Wilcoxon was well enough to return to Oklahoma. Within weeks he was back on the OU campus with a picc line in his arm, eager to complete his senior year. Nine hours per semester were balanced with weekly lab tests and monthly spinal taps to infuse chemotherapy. Every three months, he was on a plane to Houston with his mom.

Jimmy proudly earned his OU bachelor of arts in geography in May and began law school in August. The quarterly trips to Houston will continue for two years, when he will be considered cancer free.

Jim and Andrea Wilcoxon are profoundly grateful for everything—their son's life, access to top medical care and the ability to take advantage of it. But they also are aware it all came at a price. Andrea missed her youngest son's senior year of high school, and Jim suffered from having to be away during much of Jimmy's treatment. Now that the worst is over, they can see what a difference the Peggy and Charles Stephenson Cancer Center would have made to their family.

“Being only three hours away would have made it easy to go home for the weekend or for our family to come visit,” Andrea says. “It would have been wonderful; you would have had the physical support of your family, which would be huge. For our

state to have something that is comparable . . . I can't even think of the words to describe it. It's a wonderful gift for Oklahomans to have this resource, that option right here at your back door.

“When you go through something like this, your priorities change in a heartbeat, and you realize that your family is the only thing that matters.”

Anne Barajas Harp is a freelance writer living in Norman.