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Middle Tennessee Medical Center CEO Gordon Ferguson is the DNJ Person of the Year.

# MTMC CEO a leader, servant

## Ferguson's philosophy faith-based

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When the new Middle Tennessee Medical Center opened on Oct. 2, it culminated nearly a decade of maneuverings that delivered Murfreesboro and Rutherford County a world-class healthcare facility and hospital.

Since 2006, Gordon Ferguson has served MTMC as president and chief executive officer. Among various duties, he has overseen construction of the \$267 million hospital and \$26 million outpatient service facility, directed establishment of multiple joint ventures, and completed a master plan as part of the facility's overall strategic plan.

And he also directed the massive move from the previous facility on North Highland Avenue into the new facility on Medical Center Parkway.

In as much, Ferguson has been named The Daily News Journal's 2010 Person of the Year for Rutherford County.

“Certainly, this was very much a team effort, beginning with our (MTMC) Board (of Directors) to our medical staff and all our associates,” Ferguson says of being named 2010 Person of the Year.

“... While I am the CEO, it is really a privilege to lead this organization, in particular with it being a faith-based organization. There is just a good chemistry there with my own personal values and the values of the organization.”

### **Where it all began**

Gordon Ferguson doesn't necessarily wear his Scottish heritage on his sleeve, although he won't hesitate to let you know he spent the first 10 years of his life in Scotland as the son of a Presbyterian preacher.

“Whenever you move from your country of birth to another country, it has a long-lasting impression,” Ferguson says. “I remember when we first came over to Knoxville, I had this vision in my mind of cowboys and Indians being in America. Obviously, when I got here, it was very different.”

Ferguson decided to wear his heritage around his waist and thighs down to just above his knees. It came in 2006 at the commissioning ceremony celebrating his appointment as president and chief executive officer of Middle Tennessee Medical Center.

It was and still is the only time he has worn the kilt of his father, Robert.

“I didn't want to be the center of attention for that reason,” Ferguson says. “But it did mean a lot to me to be wearing it on that occasion.”

That's because Ferguson's basis for his “servant leadership” philosophy was formed while growing up the child of a minister. Most notably, he followed his father on regular visits to hospitals and often got himself lost on purpose to witness firsthand all that goes into healthcare giving.

“As a kid, Gordon would go into the hospital and sit in the waiting room and just watch people and watch healthcare,” says Timm Glover, MTMC vice president for Mission Integration. He oversees everything that relates to the hospital’s faith-based mission.

“Gordon literally has worked from the ground floor up to CEO,” Glover adds. “To me, that speaks to his humility. It speaks to a kind of integrity about him.”

In 1969 when Ferguson was 10, the family moved from Scotland to Knoxville, where he attended high school and the University of Tennessee.

“He is not the stereotypical preacher’s kid,” says Michael O’Bannon, reverend of First United Methodist Church in Murfreesboro, the church Ferguson’s family attends. “... A lot of preacher’s kids are a bit unruly. I never got that impression.

“His parents’ household of faith has informed him deeply in that he is a prayerful person dedicated to the life of the church.”

All of which made it even more special for Ferguson to wear that kilt during the commissioning celebration. But how did he do wearing it?

“Apparently, I didn’t do very well based on what some people have told me,” Ferguson says.

Andy Brown, MTMC vice president of Medical Affairs and a close Ferguson friend, attended the celebration and agrees with Ferguson’s assess-

ment of his kilt management.

"We had to coach him to make sure he had proper etiquette in being seated in front of a group while wearing the kilt," Brown said. "For a man, he's got pretty good looking legs."

Ferguson's wife, Cindy, concurs: "He has cute knees."

## From idea to reality

In 2002, MTMC leadership was given approval by its parent company, St. Louis-based Ascension Health, to purchase 68.5 acres of undeveloped property adjacent to Interstate 24 at the cost of \$80,000 per acre.

The deal and impending hospital project spurred a tremendous increase in retail and commercial development near the area and creation of the Gateway Project, a planned business and industrial complex. It also caused the construction of Medical Center Parkway that linked Broad Street near downtown with a new exchange for Interstate 24.

"I was not willing to give up on this project and wanted to definitely see it happen for the good of our community," Ferguson says of the project that seemed to begin slowly but accelerate until the actual groundbreaking on

April 6, 2008.

"But I also wanted to see it done right," Ferguson says.

According to Brown, it was Ferguson's leadership style that made the construction and eventual move a success.

"The complexity of building and moving a hospital is something that really is unimaginable," Brown says. "Most people are never faced with a task that difficult. And Gordon was able to manage all of the various aspects of the build, the planning, the complexity of the move, and assure that all came off in a well-coordinated fashion."

## A strong foundation

Gordon met Cindy while both worked at Baptist Hospital in Knoxville. He was in administration and she was a speech pathologist, a career she continues today with Murfreesboro City Schools.

They were married in 1988 and have two children — Robbie, 18, a senior at Siegel High School who will attend University of Tennessee; and Andy, 15, a freshman at Siegel.

On their first date, the future husband and wife attended a college basketball game in Knoxville between Tennessee and Alabama. And when Gordon refused to do the wave

while at the game, well, Cindy already knew how to describe him.

"On our first date, I did call him a stuffed shirt," she says. "He wouldn't do the wave. So, I called him a stuffed shirt. And he still won't do the wave. And he is still at times a stuffed shirt, but he is quite a guy."

Ferguson has an explanation.

"Actually, I was late picking her up, and I didn't have time to change," he says. "Just doing the wave in a coat and tie didn't feel right to me. That's probably a characteristic that I haven't grown out of."

The Fergusons admit that Gordon being MTMC's CEO the past few years has been demanding, both physically and emotionally. But they have managed to maintain a healthy home life for several reasons.

"When the hospital was starting to be built, we knew that was going to be a big time commitment for him and that we would support him any way that we could and be involved as much as we could," Cindy says. "We made sure that the time when dad was home that we really worked hard and made sure that it was good times."

Ferguson also notes that strong Christian values and faith were crucial.

"I couldn't have gone

through this without being anchored with a strong sense of faith," he says. "There were many nights where you would be so tired and have so many things going on, you needed to have that quiet time in prayer."

"Part of going to church on Sunday and worshipping, it does provide that respite where you can block things out and have that time to yourself and recharge your batteries."

Ferguson's pastor saw all that and more up close and personal.

"Gordon is a very humble person," O'Bannon says. "Each time, he faced a new challenge, he approached that with prayer. On more than one occasion, he would be at the kneeling rail at the end of the service in prayer seeking guidance toward meeting some of his challenges, in particular building and moving of the hospital."

## New MTMC and beyond

Gordon Ferguson very much embraces "servant leadership" in his role as CEO at MTMC.

"Gordon is the poster and the symbol of servant leadership," Glover says. "He is interested in how to help people really excel in their own gifts. Gordon looks at his own work — and it spills over to us, too — as a calling and a min-

istry."

And the response to the new MTMC has been just as nearly overwhelming with all the aspects of construction and implementation. After all, it was MTMC's stated goal to build a state-of-the-art facility that incorporates many of "the latest patient-focused design elements" and serve community needs for many years.

"I think we couldn't have asked for the actual physical move to have gone any better," Ferguson says. "We had a great initiative called 'Move Strong' that everybody rallied around."

Ferguson also understands that in his role as MTMC's CEO he automatically becomes a leader in the community in which he works and resides.

"It is very much about earning the community's respect, both as an institution and as a person," he says. "I am very much aware we need to be part of this community. If we want the residents of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County to support the hospital, we very much need to be out there supporting the community."

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