

Health care company comes to Hackensack

BY MARK J. BONAMO
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Joel Markel came to the health care industry in the 1980s more by fate than by choice.

"In 1981, I lost my brother-in-law to lymphoma, leaving my sister widowed at the age of 33 with two children," said Markel, a New Jersey resident who was then working as a jeweler. "In 1987, my sister was diagnosed with malignant melanoma. Six weeks before she died in 1989, my wife gave birth to my second son. It was clear that he was sick from birth, and we found out that he was born with a rare form of cancer. He died in 1990."

Home health care became an issue in Markel's home following this series of tragic events. Markel's response to his experiences was to start up Preferred Home Health Care & Nursing Services, a company located in both New Jersey and Pennsylvania that tries to provide the highest quality care and better services for underprivileged clients in need of home health care. The firm opened up its Hackensack office on Main Street in October.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PREFERRED HOME HEALTH CARE & NURSING SERVICES

Joel Markel, CEO of Preferred Home Health Care & Nursing Services, left, and Jonathan Herman, chief operating officer, recently brought their company to Hackensack's Main Street.

"I remember how bad home health care was in my son's case—there was so such thing as a pediatric nurse," said Markel, the com-

pany's president. "I felt the need to do something. First, I tried a support group for fathers who had lost children. Then, I saw an ad for a

small home health care agency in the newspaper, and I decided to buy it. After all of my experiences, I just couldn't go back to the jewelry business. I have tried to do a better job by helping people make better use of their time and dollars, including better supervision of patients and less sporadic care."

Todd Thiede, Preferred's chief financial officer, described how Markel's personal struggles with home health care affects the way that the company does business.

"We put a premium on training our nurses, and our nurses are our strongest suit," Thiede said. "We do a lot of hands-on training before anyone sets foot in anybody's home."

Jonathan Herman, the company's chief operating officer, noted the company's special focus on pediatric care.

"Focusing on pediatrics is in some ways a niche market, but we are one of a few companies that really focus on critically sick pediatric patients," Herman said. "We've brought in a respiratory therapist to work alongside our nurses to help our critically sick pediatric patients."

According to Herman, opening an office in Hackensack fits well with the company's overall goals.

"Hackensack University Medical Center is here, which is important because we are getting referrals from them," Herman said. "Our South Orange office was reaching people further and further north, so we decided to supplement that office. This new office helps us to better serve more families and complements our geographic coverage of North Jersey and the whole state."

Herman also referenced family tragedy as a force behind the company's vision.

"We know how uncertain things can be when you're dealing with a sick family member," Herman, the son of Markel's late sister, said. "The last thing you want to worry about with home health care is the nurses coming into your home. What was borne out of our experience as a family was our dedication to ensuring that families just have to worry about the health of their children, not the people coming in to care for them."

The staff at Preferred also tends to work with patients that are economically disadvantaged, which leads to a different set of challenges.

"We're dealing with a lot of sick kids from very poor areas, and they're typically on Medicaid or dealing with HMOs," Thiede said. "Sometimes, there are problems with insurance companies. It's the education of the nurses, but also the empathy of [Markel], that together help us to understand what's going on outside of the clinical facts. We become advocates for the child."

Both Thiede and Herman came from Wall Street backgrounds. But they feel that they have found a purpose for their lives that is beyond dollars and cents.

"There was no feeling day-to-day that you were changing things for the better," Thiede said. "Now, whether it's hearing about the clients or dealing with the insurance companies, I feel a lot more fulfilled. We're growing a company, and we're helping people. The best case scenario is when people get better. That may be a loss of revenue to us, but that's something that gets you excited to go to work."

Preferred
Home Health Care & Nursing Services