

from
NEUROSURGEON
to
TROJAN
MAN

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WHY WOULD **ROBERT RASHTI**, WHO ONCE EARNED SIX FIGURES AS A DOCTOR, CHOOSE TO BECOME CEO OF AN OFTEN-MISUNDERSTOOD, UNDER-FUNDED, NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATION — AND DECLINE TO ACCEPT A SALARY?

IN A SNOWY DAY IN JANUARY, ROBERT RASHTI, "BOB" TO FRIENDS AND "DOCTOR" TO PATIENTS, COULDN'T HELP BUT STAND OUT.

He was seated with a group of 14, all crowded together at Bottoms Up Pizza in Richmond. They chatted across the table and passed plates of food.

Voices grew louder, as did the piped-in music, and smiles inched wider.

An observer may have thought a birthday cake would soon be delivered.

Rashti was talking, too, but with a deeper, more controlled voice than the others. And he wasn't joking around like his friends.

The difference in his demeanor couldn't be attributed only to the fact that he was one of just two men at the table.

Instead, he may have had a sixth sense that something in the nearby General Assembly building wasn't quite right.

RASHTI is usually an easy smiler.

When he was introduced to a group of professionals participating in the local Chamber

of Commerce's Leadership Hampton Roads program two years ago, he guffawed and threw his head back.

Of course, he had ample motivation.

The woman charged with his introduction had gotten creative.

She didn't stand and simply say "This is Bob Rashti, Chief Executive Officer of Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Virginia."

She sang a song — the main chorus of which was a loud, resounding "Trojan M-a-a-a-n."

A perfect rip-off of the condom commercial. Rashti's used to such jokes. He's been the organization's leader for three years, although he never intended to be.

His wife, Margie, laughs at what's happened to his life, and hers.

"Bob was going 'off-call,' finally, after 27 years of being on-call as a doctor," she remembers. "We thought about what we would do with all of our time. We had always supported Planned Parenthood and we decided to get more involved. We joined the board. *Other people travel.*"

Margie giggled.

"I became board chair," she continued, "and at one meeting, the CEO, who had been there for 25 years, suddenly resigned."

Planned Parenthood was sinking as they used reserve funds to keep their doors open, so Dr. Rashti stepped in as acting CEO.

His motivation could have been a desire to set an example for his children: He and Margie have three daughters, who were then ages 11, 18 and 22.

Or his favorite Jewish expression, "Takun Olam," which means "repair the world,"

could have motivated him, too.

The board conducted a nationwide search, but even after selecting three finalists, they didn't find a match.

"That's when Bob told me he was throwing his hat into the ring," said Margie. "It was a huge leap of faith for both of us."

But not the first for the couple.

Over 30 years ago they had taken another. Barely 18 and a nurse's aide at a hospital in Maryland, Margie was approached by Rashti, then a resident surgeon. He needed help with a spinal tap and wanted Margie and a nurse to assist. By the doctor's account, Margie was a "pretty lady," and after the nurse left the room and the patient was stabilized, Rashti turned to her.

He wanted to get a cup of coffee together, but she hesitated.

"I said, 'come on, we'll tell our grandchildren we met over a spinal tap,'" Rashti remembered. "I didn't know she was 12 years younger than me."

There was something else he didn't know.

A few months earlier, Rashti had been called to the neonatal unit to assess a preemie who was experiencing problems. Unhappy with the care the baby was receiving, Rashti complained about the attending physician to the head nurse.

The two got into an argument, with the head nurse defending the attending physician and dismissing Rashti as a young upstart.

"It was clear we didn't like each other," said Rashti. "Well, the night I went to pick up Margie for a date, that nurse answers the door, and she's Margie's mother. I was just like 'augh.' (But

*Some names have been changed.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD
by the numbers

Final figures for 2003 are still being compiled, but in 2002, Planned Parenthood brought in **\$1,466,600** in income, with **\$461,373** from contributors, **\$924,227** in patient services fees and **\$90,000** in a state grant for HIV education.

Expenses totaled **\$1,472,252**, with patient services making up the majority with **\$1,058,325** in costs. Education programs came in second with a total of **\$264,490**.

Eighty-nine percent of patients were over the age of 18.

Fifty-one percent of the patients were white and 39% African American.

Eighty-four percent were at or below 150% of the poverty level.



you know, I get hot but I forget about it." Luckily, Margie's mother does, too. She allowed her daughter to go out that night.

WATCHING RASHTI in action nowadays, one doesn't detect arrogance or anger, only confidence and concern.

At a recent staff meeting held at Planned Parenthood's Hampton health center, Rashti called the organization's directors to order in a small, paneled, folding chair-lined room. The six in the room had just joyously reacted to good news delivered by Director of Finance Heide Watterlohn.

She had received a check for \$30,000 that morning.

Chief Operation Officer Susan McGinnis wanted to know Daddy Warbucks' identity but Rashti quieted Watterlohn before she could reply.

He doesn't want any donor identified. He or she could be harassed by those who oppose Planned Parenthood. As Margie puts it, "the 'anti's' will do anything to get to Planned Parenthood supporters and stop their donations."

"I have another piece of good news," Watterlohn continued when called on.

"We bought software for the general ledger — after three years (of working at Planned Parenthood)."

She laughed in relief.

"The software we're using at the moment is from the '80s and it's not even covered with a maintenance contract. We got the new one for the price we can afford, and it will be installed somewhere between now and June."

"OK," said Rashti, "Education...?"

Director of Education Sharon Sykes, who's been on staff for six months, jumped in:

"The past couple of weeks, Education has been working on VDH (Virginia Department of Health) grants, Jerry's grant and Gus' grant (Jerry and Gus are two employees). We have submitted work plans that have pretty much been submitted the last few years, and they're no longer acceptable. So we've been working on those and revising those. We've been going back and forth for a few weeks. They want to see more tracking of negotiation skills and skill building-type activities."

"Well," said Rashti with a touch of frustration in his voice, "you know Gus' grant is probably not going to come through."

"Mmm hmm," replied Sykes. "We've hired Elza. She's the new health educator. She'll be working with the new Real Life Real Talk program. For Franklin and Suffolk. That's an enormous project that one educator is going to take on. I think when we meet with our donors next week, we need to stress that one educator is good, but we're going to need to have an additional educator or two."

"I have it in that little folder," said Rashti. "You'll see, a comment that one educator is a great start but the burden of trying to change all of this on one educator is unrealistic..."

I was going to ask the people we're presenting to, especially in Franklin, whether or

COO Susan McGinnis wishes more people would support Planned Parenthood: "When I lived in California, everyone went there, everyone took care of it."

not they could kind of help cultivate the school board individuals and help open those doors that aren't generally open."

"Yes," said Sykes, "we would need to start at the top."

Virginia Andersen, director of development, leaned forward, concerned about something else.

"So Jerry's grant seems secure then?"

"Well," replied Sykes, "for as many times as they've faxed back his work plan, I'd hope so."

When it came to Nancy Sinibaldi's turn, the director of professional service looked over the top of her glasses dramatically.

"I don't have anything to say," she declared.

"That would be a first," Rashti quipped.

"I don't have anything to say," replied Sinibaldi, "However..."

The group erupted in laughter.

"I have some good news, too. You know, usually when things are donated to Planned Parenthood it's usually about ready to be put in the trash. The computer that Matthew gave to us is very good. I'm very happy about that."

"I had a new student with me and a new nurse practitioner came in. She's the new one we did all the paperwork on but she needs to go through orientation. But we're

kind of short right now."

"I have another one for you," said McGinnis, the COO. "She called me yesterday."

"Jessica," said Sinibaldi with hesitation, "Jessica will not be with us anymore in the Hampton office. To replace her, we'll have Linda on Mondays and Fridays and Lucy on Tuesday and Thursday. However, Linda hasn't passed Boards, hasn't got her temporary license so we're not real sure when she's going to be able to start. We're hoping by the 15th but between now and the 15th we're extremely short."

"You can't split you and Carla up?," asked Rashti. "Oh wait, Carla's going to..."

"Oakland," said Sinibaldi, "We're switching Emma and..."

"You," Rashti said.

"Yes, that's what's going to happen. But it means we can't doublebook at Virginia Beach. We'll do something. Lucy will be here every Tuesday and Thursday night. Linda, we're not sure when she'll be able to start off. As soon as she can, she'll be up and running because she's worked with us for two rotations as a student.

"If they're only working at night," wondered Watterlohn, "who will be here during the daytime?"



According to Rashti, Nancy Sinibaldi has a special knack for getting teenagers to involve their parents in important decisions.



"The night shift is 12 to 8," said Sinibaldi, "and the day shift is 10 to 5."

She continued, turning to Rashti: "There's a lot of concern, I'd like to discuss with you, about the two nights in Virginia Beach. Some of the staff is asking, 'can it be changed to a 10 to 6 instead of 12 to 8.'"

"Elizabeth's running stats to see which of the two evenings we're open is the most, um, productive," offered McGinnis, "and my gut feeling is Tuesday is the high income. Monday and Tuesday are big days there."

"We'll look at that but," said Rashti, "you know, it's not something I'm thinking is gonna happen. We'll have to look at the finances but you know..."

Rashti paused, took a deep breath and slowed his voice.

"Patient service is really the key that we're offering, and we can either treat our patients, our clients, or we can treat the staff. Whatever decision we make will be on treating the patients and the staff came on board with this. Who is most concerned with this?"

"Everybody," said Sinibaldi.

"Cindy gave her two-week notice," said Susan.

"OK," said Rashti. "We'll look the numbers."

"OK, don't shoot me," joked Sinibaldi.

"And if you do it there, what about Hampton?," wondered Watterlohn.

"Absolutely, what one's going to do, the others..." said Rashti.

"But Hampton has always been open two nights," argued Sinibaldi. "Two nights are better for Hampton only because that's when the college kids come in."

"Anyway, I do have one patient coming in today who I'm real concerned about. It's an IUD failure and we don't get many of those. She put in an IUD two years ago and now she's pregnant. So, we'll be setting her up. You may be doing her also, couldn't get a hold of the patient last night so you're still set up for Virginia Beach at 10 a.m.

"OK, I would like to talk to you briefly about that particular patient right after here," said Rashti.

"The IUD," asked Sinibaldi, "or the Virginia Beach?"

"The IUD," answered Rashti, "because you're saying she wants a medical (abortion)?"

"No, no, I don't know what she wants. Yeah, she may want a medical."

"I need some input from Dr. D about a medical and an IUD," said Rashti.

"The IUD is going to come out before," Sinibaldi assured him. "I'll take it out tonight."

"OK, just, I'm a neurosurgeon by trade. OK?"

The group laughs at Rashti's concerned reminder.

"Anything else?," he asked of Sinibaldi.

"No, I'm very happy."

"For someone who didn't have much to say it was a loaded lot. You should get her on a good day," Rashti joked. "So, Operations?"

"WE STARTED OFF this year with security training," COO McGinnis said as she started her report. "We had a security issue here at Hampton with an unexpected white male announcing he was here to pick up some boxes, and none of us had arranged that so we're having the police check on us more frequently. In February, the intern training is again about security and we'll have a Norfolk detective attend."

"Staff changes, um, since we last met we've had three people, actually, umm, five total move on. Kay has left Hampton and Norfolk, Cindy turned in her notice at Virginia Beach, Elizabeth finished up her time in Norfolk and Kendall resigned but has then come back on certain days she can get child care. I wrote down the names of the new staff. I need to do reference checks. I ran an ad in the paper and found some really great people. I need to set them up with Dr. Rashti to meet him. It looks like it's going to be a smooth transition, as smooth as possible. We were in the process of training a volunteer that Margie found, a really great gal. Stephanie Galley, she was shadowing Nancy and doing pregnancy/abortion option counseling. She's been in Norfolk and loves it now and wants to stay there..."

"As for the centers, I know Hampton has been doing better financially."

"Actually they are," Watterlohn agrees. "I looked at their average this morning and they are above \$900, so it's really good."

"So that's finally coming back to life," said McGinnis. "We're in the process of changing our janitorial service from monthly to weekly in all the centers."

"It was every two weeks to every week," Rashti said. "And the staff can help out in between, too."

"Yes, the staff is vacuuming and cleaning," said McGinnis. "OK. We had to discontinue using U.S. mail for mailing our cultures and Virginia Beach is now set up with Velocity Press. We've had to increase the fee for the cultures a dollar to cover that cost of a delivery service. We're in the process of setting that up for Hampton. Insurances, we're now contracting with a private health care system, it's a huge network and in there is Cigna. We're also wrapping up Virginia Premiere today and contracting with them to provide prenatal care and reproductive health care. That's a branch of Medicaid in Virginia. For services, for Essure, (a hysteroscopic tubal ligation, a new, less-invasive procedure) equipment has been ordered through Tidewater Medical and it should arrive by the end of next week. That's it."

"Great, OK," said Rashti. "And now, what makes things tick, Development..."

"Yeah \$30,000 check!," said Andersen, the director of development. "Year-end fundraising was up slightly from last year, not a great deal but enough. We had some people who came to

us who ordinarily give to PPFA (Planned Parenthood Federation of America). So that was nice to see them come on board. Most foundations have a spring grant cycle so we're pretty heavy into that right now. We're looking into a new autoclave and a new color copier for the education department so they don't have to keep using my little black and white one. I talked to Steven Henry, wonderful Steven. He's going to help us with a foundation up in Boston which last year gave us a nice gift. He wants to get us a bigger one, we're going to ask for a little bit more. That would be general operating money which would be wonderful."

"Yeah," said Rashti with a sigh.

"I also had a very encouraging talk with a foundation that does not yet exist that will start its grant funding between June and October. I talked to their executive director and he said, 'I know you all do great work and I look forward to seeing your proposal.' I think that's pretty encouraging to me and that would be for helping the Petersburg education program. That's potentially a pretty big grant. On Friday, Sharon and I will go up to Petersburg to accept our grant award for our education program. I'm very curious to see who else is accepting. Petersburg put the call out to reduce the teen pregnancy rate in Petersburg and when I went to a grant writing workshop for it, there was a crisis pregnancy center there."

"That's not going to reduce it," Rashti exclaimed.

"I know," Andersen said with a laugh.

"We might continue with the Randolph Foundation but we ought to be looking at instead of a facility-type thing, another educator, or two, three," Rashti said looking at Sykes, the education director. "Could you use another educator?"

"Oh yeah, I'd love to have two or three in each city."

"I've gotten some good feedback as far as Newport News education funding as well from another foundation," said Andersen, "so that'll be another new potential source."

"We should really go into Williamsburg also," said Watterlohn.

"We need to get into the schools," said Andersen.

"We need another educator," said Rashti.

"I did talk to another (local company about funding) and they had two people talk to me and say no," said Andersen. "Absolutely no."

"Absolutely no?," teased Rashti.

"I think they had some predetermined, well, people they already give funding to anyway, and they wanted us to know we wouldn't be on their list anytime soon. But the spring will be very busy for grants, money coming in. Of course, I read this morning that TRAP laws (which would require Planned Parenthood to update its facilities to near-hospital standards) passed the House (of the General Assembly) and means that the capital campaign has really got to start."



Margie Rashti finds her volunteer work "way harder" than she imagined, but she says she'll continue until she "can't function anymore."

"Oh, they made it law?," inquired Watterlohn.

"No, it made it through the House," said Andersen, "and it still has to go to the Senate."

"It's not going to happen until 2006, most likely," predicted Rashti. "I mean, that's when we're going to be most vulnerable for it. I mean, it could happen anytime but it's probably going to hopefully fail in the Senate committee but if it doesn't, the governor would veto it. But it's in the future that we're going to have to be dealing with that. We'll see what happens."

RASHTI, 61, has learned to take things one step at a time.

"Proceed with caution" could be his mantra.

He doesn't mention the names of the doctors who work in his health centers because they get death threats.

They've had protesters in front of their houses, and other Planned Parenthood staffers have opened letters tainted with brown and white substances.

The three health centers have received a total of six anthrax threat letters.

Margie, who serves as volunteer director of external affairs and opened one of the letters, had to strip down, put on a HAZMAT suit and later wait 24 hours before touching anyone, just as a precaution. As she stood in the suit in an ambulance, she saw her husband on the other side of the yellow police tape holding up a bottle of antibiotics.

She laughed.

And then cried.

Unlike many doctors, Rashti had never hesitated to list his number in the phone book. But security consultants from the national



“I feel more like I’m in public affairs,” say Director of Development Virginia Andersen. “Even people who think they know what we do don’t understand how strong our education programs are.”

it has become increasingly identified with almost exclusively abortion because we’re always a proponent of women’s choice. In reality three percent of our patients (have abortions.)”

IRONICALLY, “CHOICE” was the reason why Rashti traveled to Richmond in January. The day was designated Pro-choice Day, and he and representatives from various Planned Parenthoods, NOW affiliates and other organizations visited legislators.

Well, at least the legislators’ offices.

Most were busy in committees, or meeting with others, or maybe just not interested.

Legislators’ aides graciously received the lobbyists-for-a-day, but the visitors weren’t sure if they successfully delivered Planned Parenthood’s message that choices should be available for women.

Never mind trying to explain that Planned Parenthood wants to eliminate the need for abortion through safe-sex education.

Not that anyone expects overwhelming support from the state on that topic either.

In 1998, then-Governor Gilmore vetoed state funding for sex education in schools. Each city was left to fund programs, if they chose to at all.

Many, including Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and Portsmouth, now offer only abstinence-based programs.

Planned Parenthood usually connects with teenagers, and sometimes their parents, through community- and church-based programs instead.

The only school system that could be labeled “progressive” in making the most of Planned Parenthood’s educational offerings is Petersburg. With 73 percent of births in the city occurring out of wedlock, city and school officials saw a domino effect: More dropouts, more abused children, more welfare recipients and more sexually transmitted diseases.

Rashti prefers this domino effect: “Every dollar spent with family planning saves three in Medicaid costs,” he says.

At the school board’s request, a fulltime Planned Parenthood educator has been assigned to work with the city’s middle schools.

Rashti sees more hope on the horizon. He’s recently joined forces with a Portsmouth attorney who says he’s “conservative” but wants circumstances to improve for the city’s young residents.

Maybe, working together, they could convince the school board of the need for safe-sex education.

Maybe.

Of course, plenty of other projects need attention, too. Rashti and his board have talked about consolidating some offices in a new building, one that could meet the potential TRAP laws. At the same time, Rashti envisions offices in Portsmouth, Petersburg and Suffolk, and while he’s reaching for the moon, why not a mobile unit that would help migrant workers on the Eastern Shore?

And how about 12 educators on staff instead of the current five?

Most pressing, though, on that day in January in Richmond, was the legislation pending before the General Assembly.

Rashti had a list of 28 different bills under consideration. Planned Parenthood’s lobbyist had reviewed them, and marked only five with capital letters spelling “SUPPORT.”

The opposed bills included ones limiting access to emergency contraception and others establishing rights for fetuses.

“It really upsets me that our legislature is more reactive than proactive,” Rashti said. “Anti-choice, anti-contraception. Instead of trying to make abortion services or emergency contraception inaccessible, go the other route and make it less necessary through education. Let it be accessible, but less used because people are making better choices.”

As Rashti sat at the table at Bottoms Up Pizza, munching on nachos piled high with cheese, salsa and guacamole and occasionally talking to the others around him, another group of people were gathering. It was the same group that Rashti and his associates had hoped to talk to just hours before. Now, they sat in the General Assembly’s House and voted in favor of the TRAP regulations, which Rashti predicts will cost Planned Parenthood hundreds of thousands of dollars in facility improvements — without any improvement in service to patients.

Repeating the news later, Rashti smirked and summed up his feelings:

“So much for our lobby day.” ■

Footnote: Rashti was later cheered by good news: Last Thursday, the Senate Education and Health Committee killed House Bill 1414 — which would have made it illegal for public colleges to distribute emergency contraception. Also, the committee rejected a proposal that would have excluded Planned Parenthood from receiving any taxpayer dollars.

office recommended he no longer do so, and also advised the couple to change their license plates’ records to an address other than their home. “Anti’s” have been known to find “pro’s” through tracing license plates.

Rashti feels angry at times and somewhat anxious because he’s been forced to make these changes.

Yet, it hasn’t made him shy away from controversy.

In fact, Rashti faces it head on. When he became CEO, he and the board of directors decided to offer on-site abortions.

One reason was to help those who are financially strapped. Three or four for-profit organizations offer abortions locally, says Rashti. He wanted to offer a lower price, and if the procedure becomes unprofitable and those other organizations close down, he wants to be sure women have an option locally.

The Planned Parenthood board also wanted to seize the “teachable moment” available when a woman discovers she is unexpectedly pregnant. Some of the women haven’t been able to use contraception effectively, and others, not at all. Forty-seven percent of unplanned pregnancies are a result of unprotected sex, and 70 percent of the population has sex without contraception, says Rashti.

“That’s our target group,” he notes. “We can connect with them and counsel them. We don’t want to see them again for the same problem.”

While Rashti speaks calmly about abortion and doesn’t appear to be uncomfortable discussing it, he doesn’t stay on the topic for long. And that may be because it’s a small part of what his organization does.

“A large percentage of people think they know what Planned Parenthood is about,” said Rashti, “and they do not. I think, unfortunately,