Greg Van Pelt: 38 years of faithful service

Words of wisdom from Greg | During his time as Providence’s Oregon chief executive, Greg wrote a monthly personal message to more than 17,000 employees. These notes always reflected Greg’s special touch. Here’s a look back at those messages:

■ DEC. 16, 2010
“Joan and I have been blessed with another granddaughter. Audrey was born in Chicago the day after Thanksgiving. Just the sight of her … reminds me of the miracle of life, and of the joy and hope of Christmas through a child’s eyes … “And then, to remind me that life is a strange balance, I tweaked my back hanging Christmas lights. In the end, I was reminded how little control I have in the big picture, and the small and big things that make life such a great journey."

■ APRIL 20, 2011
“As people of Providence, we will be called on for many changes over the next several years. … more people will need our services; our state will need our best thinking in meeting demands that we presently cannot afford; and our country will need our best thinking on how to care for our elderly with new models of care that significantly reduce cost.”

■ APRIL 13, 2012
“We follow our Mission, which calls us to care for patients when they show up at our doors and when we find them in need. And that’s the most important thing we can do. I am continuously amazed, and consistently humbled by you, the people of Providence.”

■ OCT. 8, 2012
“The trust people place in us is sacred. We have a powerful vision: ‘Together, we answer the call of every person we serve: Know me, care for me, ease my way.’ As people of Providence we have a great opportunity to bring this vision to life and thrive in what promises to be a new era of health care. Each of us – including me – can make a difference every day.”

■ FEB. 8, 2013
“Af"r very careful thought and deep discernment, I have decided to retire from Providence … There is never an easy time for leadership transition. At the same time, as ‘One Ministry Committed to Excellence,’ our path is clear for Providence, and Oregon is well on the way in its transformation journey. “More than ever, these words ring true to me as never before: ‘All I know about tomorrow is that Providence will rise before the sun.’”

■ FEB. 12, 2013
“I’ve spent more than 38 years working with the Sisters of Providence, and I can tell you they inspire me more than ever … I am struck by two of the most simple and direct words of encouragement and advice that they provide to us. They ask us to work ‘in community’ … and to be kind to each other. If we are doing those things, we know we are on the right path.”

■ APRIL 10, 2013
“I will start a new life next week and have everything that I have learned from you to carry with me into that future. The emotion that envelops me is simply ‘gratitude.’ “I cannot imagine a more fulfilling way to spend a life than with caring women and men who truly put others before themselves. For all you have done for me and our family, and thousands of families like us, thank you!”

FAR LEFT: In September 1985, Greg Van Pelt returned to what was then St. Vincent Hospital & Medical Center as associate administrator, working alongside administrator Tom Underriner, father of the Oregon Region’s new chief executive, Dave Underriner. “Management is an opportunity to serve the people who provide the care, which is why we’re all here,” said Greg.

LEFT: Greg hosted Luciano Pavarotti, right, when the famed tenor witnessed a heart surgery at Providence St. Vincent in 1989. Pavarotti said watching the surgery team was like “seeing a highly trained orchestra in concert.” The towel in Pavarotti’s left hand had been wrapped around his neck to protect the singer’s golden vocal cords from the cold air of the operating room.
Listen to the words people use to describe Greg Van Pelt:

“A servant leader of the highest order.”
“A living and breathing example.”
“The best of Providence … and my friend.”

They are the words that describe 38 years of faithful service. Appreciation for Greg springs forth as readily as his own warm smile and his words of encouragement and counsel.

GREG’S PROVIDENCE HISTORY
Greg began his service with Providence as an administrative fellow at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center, where he would later become administrator. He also served Providence Portland Medical Center as associate administrator. He helped start Providence Medical Group; led Providence Health Plan during significant growth; brought two hospitals, in Seaside and Newberg, into the Providence ministry and worked with leaders to develop obstetric services at Providence Portland and a neonatal intensive care unit at Providence St. Vincent.

He has provided leadership outside Oregon as well. Greg spent nine years based in Washington state as a Providence executive, including his role as senior vice president for all regions in the Providence health system, before returning to Oregon as chief executive. He served on the board of the Catholic Health Association for many years.

GREG IN THE COMMUNITY
You learn something about Greg’s community commitment when you hear a story from his early days with Providence St. Vincent Medical Center. Shortly after he started work as an administrative fellow, a young immigrant girl named Virginia Garcia died needlessly because of a lack of access to health care.

Tom Underriner – the father of Greg’s successor in the Oregon Region, Dave Underriner – was the hospital administrator at the time. When he heard what had happened, he said to Greg, “We can do better than this.” Greg agreed, and began his work improving the health of our community. He was instrumental in the founding of the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, which has grown to be the safety net for many poor and vulnerable people in our community.

Greg’s dedication to the community is reflected in many other ways. He worked with Community Action to improve access to prenatal care, and now Washington County has some of the highest rates of providing early prenatal care for expectant mothers. He helped establish a joint venture with Tuality Hospital to enhance access through primary and urgent care.

In developing a vision for population health, Greg was ahead of his time. He created a model, affectionately called “the stick-people diagram,” that depicted what
an integrated health system could do if all the pieces worked in concert to improve health. He made this vision come to life by sharing patient stories that inspired hundreds of people to work tirelessly to create a better, more connected, patient-centered and proactive system of care.

Recently Greg has been a key leader in Oregon health care reform. He is a member of Gov. John Kitzhaber’s health care transformation work group, a board member of the Oregon Health Leadership Council, and chair of the council’s Oregon Health Plan redesign and financial sustainability work group. He helped develop Health Share of Oregon, a coordinated care organization, with a goal to expand access to health services for hundreds of thousands of Oregonians.

To Greg, health care is truly a ministry, and he has instilled this value in his family. His wife, Joan, is a longtime volunteer at Providence St. Vincent. Their daughter, Emily, serves as an intensive care nurse at a hospital in Chicago, while their son, Andy, is chief operating officer of the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems.

**GREG’S LEADERSHIP**

People say they learn a lot about Greg just by watching him. “Time and time again I have watched him walk down the hall, stop, look someone in the eye, smile, and affirm their thoughts with words like ‘Exactly,’ ‘You are right on track,’ ‘Go for it.’ He gives everyone he meets his full attention,” says Janice Burger, chief executive, Providence St. Vincent Medical Center. Others mention his ability to support, encourage and mentor, and they note that Greg does this with love, humility and humor.

Through it all, Greg has placed the Mission at the forefront of his work, and planted it deeply in the hearts of the people of Providence. He has done this by his own example, by telling stories of the many lessons he has learned from the Sisters, and by creating a sustainable process for ministry leadership formation as the founding chair of the Ministry Leadership Center.

Former Providence employee Barbara Blakely remembers a message Greg wrote to his management team more than 25 years ago. He talked about facing new challenges, watching for the great works of care that happen every day, continuing the spirit of the Sisters of Providence and putting the patient first. “I am a better person for having known him and having served under his leadership,” Barbara says. “Even now, there are times when, faced with a difficult situation or decision, I recall him saying, ‘I know you’ll do the right thing.’”

In the future, it will not be possible to tell the story of Providence in the Northwest without telling the story of Greg Van Pelt. He has truly been, in the words of the Christian gospel, a “good and faithful servant.”

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT:

Greg talked with Oregon Region employees at the diversity luncheon on Jan. 10, 2011, where he observed that our sponsors, the Sisters of Providence, came to the Northwest as French-speaking women with diverse talents who cared for all, including the poor, orphans, trappers and Native Americans. Shown at left is Catherine Potter, parish outreach program, honored that year for outreach and education to the Latino community.

Greg became the Oregon Region’s chief executive in July 2010, and that month’s open house for the expanded Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center was one of his first events. John McDonald, M.D., right, medical director of the NICU and Oregon Region newborn services, offered Greg a tour of unit’s 70 monitored beds, which made it the largest NICU in the Pacific Northwest. Greg had worked to open the Providence St. Vincent NICU more than 20 years before while serving as hospital administrator.

Beginning in 1996, Greg served as the chief executive of Providence Health Plans Oregon-Washington, where he was known for focusing on Providence’s Mission and values as we served more than 800,000 members. “To achieve the success indicators,” he said, “requires extraordinary cooperation among physicians, hospitals and the health plan.”
Kudos for Greg

In his all-employee messages, Greg always made space for kudos to acknowledge achievements across the Oregon Region. For his farewell, we thought we’d reverse things and have people around the region provide their kudos to Greg. Here are some of the comments we’ve received:

“It has always amazed me how Greg can make so many individuals feel they are his best friend! When you speak to people who know him, they light up and smile. They know that they really mean something very special to him.”

Dolores Foglio, RN, family nurse practitioner, Providence Medical Group

“In my more than 40-year association with Providence, no individual has earned the love, respect and trust of the Providence community more than Greg Van Pelt.”

Kenneth E. Melvin, M.D., Brill Professor Emeritus and former director, PSVMC Department of Medicine

“Greg’s managerial capacities and his tireless commitment to the betterment of his community and the Providence Mission have made him one of the highest-respected health care professionals in America.”

Gerry Frank, lifetime member, Providence St. Vincent Medical Foundation

“Greg’s integrity, leadership and communication resonated with me so much in my years here at Providence. He inspires trust and embodies the Mission of our ministry.”

Jennifer Hendrickson, change facilitator, Strategic Management Services

“Greg is a genuinely fine human being who finds the best in people. He is a mensch, which is a Yiddish word for someone you can always rely on. He is a servant leader of the highest order.”

Jack Friedman, chief executive, Providence Health Plans

“Greg is beloved by so many people of Providence. He never forgets anyone and he has made Providence his life. He has been a leader’s leader.”

Tim Serban, chief Mission integration officer, Oregon Region

“You are a testament to his communication expertise as a leader. We have never met in person, and yet I feel that we are familiar. Thank you for your Oregon leadership.”

Davina Craig, RN, certified obstetrical nurse and clinical education coordinator, Providence Hood River Memorial Hospital

“Greg brings teams together and thinks outside the box, always helping those who are the most vulnerable in our population. He has a dynamic way of engaging people to understand the intricacies of health care and of gaining their confidence in Providence.”

Carolyn Winter, chief development officer, Providence Foundations – Oregon

“I gave Greg his flu shot this year and had a nice visit with him. I think he’s done a wonderful job.”

Maren Euwer, RN, Providence St. Vincent Medical Center

“I admire Greg professionally and personally. I want him to know how much he will be missed.”

Sue Glover, director, nursing education and staff development, Providence Milwaukie Hospital

“If there ever was a person of Providence, Greg would be the individual who came to everybody’s mind. He will forever be a part of the fabric, the spirit and the very soul of Providence. He, more than anyone else I have known in my professional lifetime of service at Providence, is the best of the best.”

Rick Waller, M.D., former director, surgery program, Oregon Region and chief of surgery, Providence St. Vincent Medical Center