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### Great save! Old Chapel Pews Find New Homes

Children's Mercy Hospital

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## Great save! Old chapel pews find new homes

Scope Messenger March 19, 2019

*Tom McCormally, Children's Mercy historian, writes the blog "For All Children Everywhere," in which he relates the many stories of our history that make this a remarkable place and the trials and tribulations of archiving and documenting our legacy.*

*In a recent post, Tom writes about the rescue and restoration of pews that had been in the hospital's chapel for more than 90 years. Here is his blog:*



Dane Sommer, Director of Spiritual Services, deserves a lot of credit for saving these pieces of Children's Mercy history.

### **By Tom McCormally Children's Mercy Historian**

Historical artifacts bring history to life in a way words cannot. (And for a word guy like me to admit that is really saying something.) The artifacts' physical presence provides a bridge to a time and a place we might otherwise only be able to imagine. With these artifacts, we can touch history. We can share a moment with those who have gone before us. We become a part of this long, loving story. Since I pulled in my public relations shingle and hung out the one that reads Children's Mercy historian, just about every day has been a good one. Despite all those good times, though, there is one sad day that I remember vividly.

It's the day we decided that the old historical display case needed to be more than dusted off, brightened up and rearranged. We decided it needed to be replaced with — oh, I hate to say it — replaced with something more modern.

Don't get me wrong, I love the new historical display. For one, we don't have to lug the heavy glass doors off the old one every now

and then and break our backs lifting, dusting and vacuuming. More important, though, the new display — with bright colors and words and pictures, a storybook and more — does a better job telling the remarkable and vivid story. The reaction from visitors and staff members tells me: we did good.

So it's not that. What made that day sad, and I have visitors and staff members confirm this sentiment too, is that the new display has few artifacts. You know: not many gadgets. Gizmos. Stuff.

We knew there was more we could do to impart of the legacy of this Kansas City institution. And we succeeded.



The old historical display needed some help.



The new display, unveiled in 2017, includes some artifacts, like these leg braces and a tiny bottle of polio vaccine, but also photos and words to tell a more complete story.

But there are days when I miss the stuff. It's preserved, of course. We found a safe place for it in a clean, climate-controlled environment. I visit now and then to see and touch and remember. I dream of finding a place to have some of it on public display because even stuff has meaning.

Which brings me to the story of the old chapel pews.



These pews were built, we believe, around 1917 for our hospital at the corner of Woodland and Independence avenues. Three of them — there could have been more, but we don't know that — were moved, along with the rest of the hospital and patients, to a small chapel just off our auditorium in 1970. And there they sat for decades, offering a place for countless troubled or restless moms and dads and doctors and nurses to sit and reflect in a quiet place. (The chapel hosted at least one wedding, too, so not all the times were sad.)

When we opened the beautiful, spacious and light-filled Lisa Barth Chapel in 2013, the room with the antique pews became the "old chapel" and its use diminished greatly. Last summer, the inevitable happened: we needed that space for something besides an under-utilized meditation/prayer room. Renovations began.

The pews were put in a warehouse. And when we were ready to move out of that warehouse, our director of Spiritual Services, Dane Sommer, got a call from the movers: either find a place for the pews or we're giving them away. Today!

Dane sprung into action. He didn't have a place for the more than 7-foot-long pews, but he knew they needed to be preserved. He rented a moving truck and picked the pews up from the warehouse. He deposited them in his garage in south Overland Park. This was on a hot Friday afternoon. It was on Monday when Dane called me to discuss our next steps.

We talked. We thought. We prayed.

Finally, I made a few phone calls and sent a few emails. I had tried before to find room for our artifacts. But space is in such demand at Children's Mercy that our historical stuff often takes a backseat to more pressing things, like, oh, incubators or operating rooms.

To make a long story short, before planting one of the pews in my own dining room for safe keeping, I found takers in our marketing department and our fund-raising department. The leaders of those teams said they would be happy to find room for one of the pews. Two done, one to go.

These two shots show the intricate carving on the wooden pews.



Two of the historical pews dry in the hospital paint shop after being repaired and stained.



The final pew will make its home in the new Children’s Research Institute building, scheduled to open next year on our Adele Hall Campus, in a nod to the importance of research in our history. In fact, one of our founders said in her final days that her one regret was that we had not more firmly established a research program. As I wrote last year before giving a talk on the history of our research program, co-founder Dr. Katharine Richardson declared: “Modern medicine is the product of the test tube and the microscope. Never in all its undertakings was there so great a possibility of good to be accomplished.”



One of the pews is delivered to the Communications and Marketing office suite.

With homes for the pews identified, we got them out of Dane’s garage and back at Children’s Mercy. In their century of life, the pews had grown a little wobbly and the wood finish was dull and worn. Our Facilities team, without hesitation, jumped at the chance to go to work preserving those pieces of our history.

Our carpenters and our painters did their magic. The pews were broken apart and glued back together. They were stained and dried and polished. Once in place, they immediately made a great impression.

“Having the pew in our department has literally brought tears to the eyes of some of our teammates,” said Shanelle Varone, Senior Administrative Director in our Philanthropy Department. “Once they realize what they represent, what we represent, it can be a bit overwhelming.”

Adding to the significance of the pews' age and their role in comforting families is the possibility that Dr. Richardson had a hand in making the benches. We know she was a woodworker when she wasn’t busy doing surgery, running a hospital and begging for money to pay for it all. So it’s possible she made or at least worked on these wooden pews. But we don’t for sure. Given the intricacies of the carving, one fellow historian suggested it was unlikely she had the woodworking skill and tools to have done all the work.



Lauren Kopfer and Verna Carr from the Philanthropy Department take a seat on one of the refurbished 100-year-old pews. Visitors are welcome in Philanthropy to take a look and touch a piece of our history.

We very well may never know that for sure. But we do know these pews provided solace for people in Dr. Richardson’s hospital during her time and continued to do so for decades after she died in 1933. It’s likely she sat on these benches, maybe even sharing a prayer or a tear with a family or child going through a tough time.

“Having one of the pews in our team’s safekeeping is a huge honor,” said Laurie Ellison, Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Children’s Mercy. “The pew is a wonderful reminder each day of the responsibility we shoulder to ensure that ... [our work] reflects the trust, spirit and heart of the Berry sisters.”

We will never know all the stories these benches could tell if they talked. But when you place your hands on these miraculous pieces of art and furniture, when you take a seat, there’s a spirit that you touch, that touches you back and connects you to history. To legacy. To purpose.

To read Tom's blog post on his website, click here: <https://forallchildreverywhere.wordpress.com/2019/03/13/take-a-seat-and-be-a-part-of-history/>



Dane Sommer, Director of Spiritual Services