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**Hospital welcomes Florida Cancer Affiliates;
*Operating room to open; Physical therapy to start;
Heart and spine doctors also are eyeing Williston***



RGH owner Jorge Perez speaks to a group Saturday night before the introduction of Dr. Rama Balaraman, who spoke on behalf of Florida Cancer Affiliates, which is part of the U.S. Oncology Network. Sitting at the table in this photo is RGH CEO Edith Mears.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 14, 2018 at 7:47 a.m.

WILLISTON -- Regional General Hospital (RGH) of Williston welcomed Florida Cancer Affiliates to its ranks Saturday evening (Jan. 13) during a dinner reception held in First United Methodist Church of Williston's Fellowship Hall.



RGH Chief Operating Officer Tillman Mears opens the program, noting his deep appreciation for the work by the hospital staff and RGH owner Jorge Perez in bringing the hospital up to its current high standards of quality and wide range of services.

About 30 people from RGH, FCA and the city government attended the event, which included a catered dinner by Olive Garden.

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RGH Chief Operating Officer Tillman Mears, the husband of RGH Chief Executive Officer Edith Mears, opened the program.

Tillman Mears introduced RGH owner Jorge Perez.

Perez shared a moving bit of information Saturday night.

For the hospital owner, Jan. 13 marks what would have been the 78th birthday for his mother who passed away in 1985, after succumbed to breast cancer at the age of 45.

And so 33 years later, for him as the owner of the hospital to be welcoming a team of doctors and others involved with oncology to provide services at RGH, the evening had even more significance than fact that these services are about two weeks away now from starting at the hospital in Williston.

Perez said his family has been involved with the health profession all of his life. He spoke about one oncologist who built a 70-doctor team over a 20-year period as part of his family's company.

When Perez bought RGH a couple of years ago, it was in a relatively distressed state. Since then, the hospital has improved and gained from all four corners and from top to bottom. The oncological services set to start are among the relatively big improvements that are on the immediate horizon.



Dr. Hersell Lindo, one of the doctors practicing medicine at RGH, was among the many esteemed visitors of the night. He specializes in obstetrics and gynecology.

Dr. Hersell Lindo, a doctor specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, and practicing medicine at RGH, was present for the event as well. Dr. Lindo is among the significant people who are helping this rural hospital serve patients.

Dr. Lindo drove from Tampa that evening just to attend the dinner and announcement of the new services at RGH. He was called away to Ocala, though, during the program.

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Hospital owner Perez is continuing to add to the methods people can be helped at RGH.

"I also have a team of cardiovascular surgeons who are working with my other hospitals," Perez said, "and they are in Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma."

Those heart doctors are anxious to join the team in Florida, especially to enjoy the temperatures in the 70-degree Fahrenheit range rather than the below zero temperatures in the winter there.

"They wanted me to go there last week and it was negative-12," Perez said. "So I said nothing that is negative can be that good. I'll stay down here where it's 75."

Perez expressed his gratitude to the community leaders and city officials for helping to support the hospital.

Tillman Mears shared with listeners that spine specialists are visiting RGH in the coming week.

The chief operating officer also said the swing bed program is on the brink of starting at RGH.

Sometimes referred to as skilled nursing, this is a special program reserved for rural hospitals with fewer than 100 beds. The swing bed program allows patients to recover from an accident, illness or surgery in a close-to-home facility.

Mears said on Saturday night that the hospital will have inpatient and outpatient physical therapy services within the next three weeks.



Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat speaks to the people on Saturday night. He mentioned his plan to retire from his mayoral duties after this current term, noting that he plans to still show up at some City Council meetings to comment. At the most recent special Williston City Council meeting, former City Councilman Jack Screws went to the podium a few times to ask questions of the city's leaders.

Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat, who has a long history with Munroe Hospital in Ocala, the laboratory at Williston Hospital (now RGH) in the 1960s, Alachua General Hospital and Shands Hospital and is now retired from that welcomed the oncology group to Williston and to the hospital in Williston.

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The mayor said he knows that RGH can become as busy as it was in the 1960s with surgery and more.

Among the other people present at the event were City Council Vice President Nancy Winger and her husband Larry, and City Councilwoman Marguerite Robinson and her husband Jerry.



Dr. Rama Balaraman tells about the advantages of rural hospitals, whether in Tasmania, Australia, or Williston, Florida.

Dr. Rama Balaraman spoke on behalf of Florida Cancer Affiliates, which is part of the U.S. Oncology Network.

Dr. Balaraman is a medical doctor whom completed college at Thanjavur Medical College, Thanjavur, India. She performed her internship in Sydney, Australia, and her residency at St. Mary's Health Center Affiliated with St. Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, Missouri.

She earned board certification through the American Board of Hematology and the American Board of Medical Oncology.

She has hospital privileges at Ocala Regional Medical Center, Munroe Regional Medical Center and West Marion Hospital (Active). Among the other Florida Cancer Affiliates medical doctors at the event were Dr. Ketan Doshi and Dr. Michael Poiesz.

Dr. Balaraman said she had a patient who brought her peanuts from Williston, and she has been eating them for a decade now.

Florida Cancer Affiliates is an independent practice out of Ocala, with another practice in The Villages and one in an area known as Timber Ridge.

A senior partner in the group Dr. Cartwright used to come to Williston General Hospital, Dr. Balaraman said. The now-retired doctor always would speak fondly of the hospital, she said.

Dr. Balaraman said there are staff members at Florida Cancer Affiliates who reside in the

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Williston area and would like to work as partners with RGH.

While she was born in India, Dr. Balaraman is Australian. She practiced in metropolitan areas of the country, but then served in the rural part of the country in Tasmania.

Tasmania is an island state of Australia.

The hospitals in the smaller towns of Tasmania are “quite able to do everything,” she said.

She was an oncologist in Launceston, Tasmania, for five years.

“A lot of times,” Dr. Balaraman said, “these rural communities will have physicians who are extremely smart. They will diagnose and manage their patients very well. The majority of things can be done in the community.”

She sees one goal of Florida Cancer Affiliates to be treating patients at RGH. Saving people from having to drive to and from Ocala and Gainesville is one advantage to using the hospital in Williston.

Among the treatment and services available through Florida Cancer Affiliates are medical oncology; hematology; diagnostic imaging; clinical trials; genetic testing; and laboratory services.

In this part of Florida, Florida Cancer Affiliates is six physicians, however in Florida, the group is about 50 physicians, Dr. Balaraman said.

There are 55 staff members working in the Ocala office, she said.

While the cancer specialists coming to the hospital in Williston are a significant step, so is opening of the operating room for surgery; inpatient and outpatient physical therapy; the swing bed program; as well as cardiologists and spine doctors.

The emergency room at RGH continues serving people with those immediate medical needs as well. And there are hospital rooms, where patients receive care from RGH staff that includes more than 100 full-time and part-time employees.