



St. Bernards Healthcare CELEBRATES 125 YEARS OF CHRIST-LIKE HEALING

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

The new year marks St. Bernards Healthcare's 125th year of serving Jonesboro and the surrounding area with Christ-like healing through education, treatment and health services. To commemorate the occasion, the Northeast Arkansas hospital system will remember its rich history and recognize its supporters throughout 2025 with a gala and several other events and opportunities.

A CHRIST-CENTERED FOUNDATION

St. Bernards Hospital came about thanks to the community of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters from the Convent of Maria Richenbach in the Canton of Unterwalden, Switzerland, by way of Pocahontas.

In the midst of a malaria outbreak in 1900, four Olivetan Benedictine sisters who had relocated to Jonesboro the year before started St. Bernards in Downtown Jonesboro to treat those who suffered from the disease. The hospital, which began with six

rooms with cots in a wood-frame house on East Matthews Street, was named St. Bernards after the sisters' patron saint, Bernard Tolomei, who originally founded the Olivetan Benedictine congregation in 1319.

Mother Mary Clare Bezner, who is originally from Lindsay, Texas, entered the community in 2005 and made her vows in 2007. She currently serves as prioress of the community and sits on the St. Bernards System Board of Directors.

"The hospital is like our baby; we want to care for her in whatever ways we can, knowing we can't do all the jobs because it's such a large facility; our main mission is that she is fully supported with prayer," said Bezner. "I think the thing that makes us the proudest is that the mission has never changed. From the very beginning, the goal was to take care of people who could not take care of themselves. In those days you didn't have hospitals that often, but they realized people couldn't take care of their own because they were sick themselves, so they had to have a place to

take people who got sick.

"That mission has never changed. That is the beauty of St. Bernards. We don't care who they are, what race or creed or if they can pay. That is the thing we are most proud of – we help everyone. We see God in every person; we are treating God himself by serving everyone who walks in."

Today, the Benedictine sisters are still very much involved with St. Bernards Healthcare and its mission, from sitting on its boards to supporting the hospital system and all it encompasses with prayer.

"We have a sister in the corporate office who is in charge of mission and ethics to make sure that our original mission is lived out, and she also works in archives to keep up with what is happening historically," said Bezner. "We also have sisters working with the pastoral care department, visiting those who are sick and praying with them. With such a large system, we are fewer in numbers, but our number one role is to be the prayer support for the entire system, 365 days a year, five times a day, both as a community and individually as sisters.

"We believe that is what is different about St. Bernards – that the actual foundation of the whole hospital is Christ; we can keep it that way because we are constantly praying to keep it that way. That is how God is using that prayer to help each person in that hospital, including the employees."

Through it all, while the sisters and their community have been the vessels of God's work in the Jonesboro community, Bezner says it's the community itself and the Godly people within it that have allowed St. Bernards to grow and thrive.

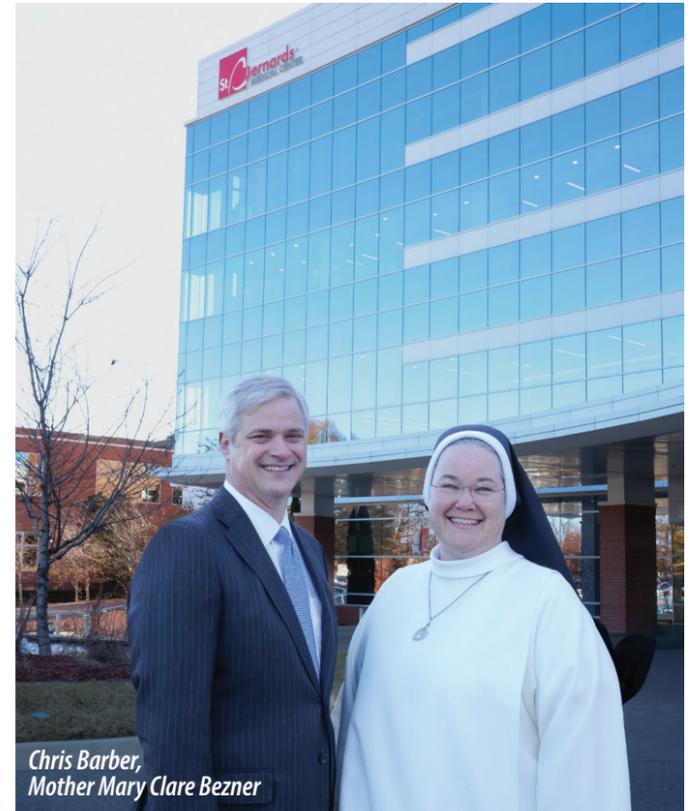
"As proud as I am of our sisters, when I look at St. Bernards and the gift God has given us through that hospital, if it wasn't for the people of God in Jonesboro and Northeast Arkansas, none of this would be possible," she said. "We were willing to take this on, but if we had not had the support of the people, this wouldn't have happened. ... It's a beautiful example of what can happen when people come together to work in unity, and it's an example of what God can do for the world."

A GROWING SYSTEM

St. Bernards Healthcare's President and CEO, Chris Barber, has been with the hospital since he interned in graduate school and worked his way up before stepping into his current role in 2010. His vision for St. Bernards aligned with its mission, and he is proud of the growth and development that continue to take place.

"Our providentially guided history reflects the community itself," said Barber, a Jonesboro native. "As the first hospital in the region, we've experienced the same highs and lows as the people we serve – from the joys of new life and abundance to times of great loss of scarcity. We love serving this community, and this community supports our mission and our people. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to say, 'Thank you,' to every person who has volunteered time, resources or advocacy to what we do. We could not make any positive impacts without that unwavering support.

"Any time we serve our communities with new health services, those communities are better places to live. Our award-winning heart program, for example, received its start more than 40 years ago. Now, we provide comprehensive heart care services that change lives and prevent families from traveling hundreds of miles to receive the care they need. The same goes for our comprehensive cancer care, women's and children's services, senior services and so



Chris Barber,
Mother Mary Clare Bezner

much more. We approach each new offering as a way to reinvest what was initially invested in us."

The changes and additions since St. Bernards' humble beginning are too numerous to count, with Barber noting that all growth provides an opportunity to touch lives and make a meaningful impact.

"Growth is only a milestone if it fits within our mission, and it's nearly impossible to prioritize these milestones," he said. "With that, however, I've witnessed many notable examples."

Barber says that in the late 1990s, St. Bernards Behavioral Health became part of St. Bernards' service lines, providing vital mental health care to the region. They also added St. Bernards Village as a retirement community for seniors who live independently or need assistance, a community that expanded in 2015 with the addition of St. Bernards Villa, an assisted living facility that also specializes in memory care.

One recent and prominent change is the surgical and ICU tower that opened in 2019 and transformed the hospital's landscape downtown.

"In those five years, we have performed nearly 50,000 surgery cases using the latest technologies and procedures," said Barber. "In addition, our 46 modern ICU beds have changed how we care for patients who need around-the-clock care and monitoring. We could not have made this impact happen without the expansion.

"Elsewhere in St. Bernards Medical Center, we renovated our Cancer Center in 2016, which expanded and combined all our cancer services into a single facility. Two years later, we did the same for our Heart Care Center, adding electrophysiology and hybrid labs while also renovating our cardiac catheterization labs. Finally, we opened the first neonatal intensive care unit in 2012, the first of its kind to exist between Little Rock and Memphis. We



*Top row: Original hospital, 1900s; first administrator, Sister Aloysia Unterberger; 1950s nursery team.
Bottom row: 1970s emergency room; 1980s Sister Benedicta leads Pastoral Care Department; 1980s nurse with child; 2000s neurosurgical care Tammy Berry, LPN, Cheryl Brashers, ORT, John Campbell, MD, Ricardo Puello, ORT.*

started with a few beds but have since expanded to 19 that can care for babies as young as 26 weeks. Again, support from the community has made this vital program exist, and we have received countless generous donations for our NICU program in the past 13 years.”

Outside of Jonesboro, two hospitals joined St. Bernard’s overall healthcare system, expanding its network of regional care. CrossRidge Community Hospital in Wynne began partnering with St. Bernard’s in 1999, and years later, Five Rivers Medical Center in Pocahontas did the same. With St. Bernard’s Five Rivers, the sisters’ journey came full circle considering they began their Arkansas ministry right there in Pocahontas. Barber says the rural hospitals allow them to provide immediate care where their communities need it.

“Along the Matthews Medical Mile, we have St. Bernard’s Imaging Center – the largest, most advanced imaging facility in the region; the Flo & Phil Jones Hospice House at St. Bernard’s – Northeast Arkansas’ only residential hospice facility; and St. Bernard’s Health & Wellness – a modern, community-centric gym and wellness center,” said Barber. “Finally, we have expanded our specialty and primary care services exponentially, opening multiple First Care and Urgent Care clinics.”

While it would have been easy for one of those changes to be the location of the hospital itself, that’s something that has remained steadfast for a reason.

“We have been in the heart of Jonesboro for 125 years,” said Bezner. “It would be easy for us to go to another part and expand, because land is precious and, as the saying goes, they’re not making more of it. But there is a reason we are anchored in the heart of Jonesboro. Here, we are carrying out our mission and goal; whenever people see our logo, it serves as a beacon of hope, should they need us. It’s making our community a better place to live.”

CELEBRATING 125 YEARS

St. Bernard’s has much planned to celebrate the important milestone, as leaders look forward to the next 125 years.

“Our 125th anniversary propels us while also celebrating our past,” said Barber. “Good leadership plans beyond our years. St. Bernard’s commitment is to continue delivering on a promise made to this community of providing Christ-like healing.

“Celebrating – remembering – the remarkable individuals who gave us our strong foundation and purpose guides us to see how we can do the same for the generations who follow us. Specifically, this anniversary gives us a chance to honor our sponsoring sisters, who have believed in the St. Bernard’s mission of providing Christ-like healing since our humble beginnings.”

The year-long celebration will begin with a pop-up museum that will open on Jan. 9 with a short program and meet-and-greet event as part of the Jonesboro Regional Chamber of Commerce’s Connect @ 4 program. During the event, St. Bernard’s will unveil a small pop-up museum that will sit in the main tower lobby all year. It will include old photos and artifacts/memorabilia, and it will also have a seating area. One of the highlights will be a timeline wrap that prominently overlooks the museum.

Next up is 1900 The Gala, a black-tie optional event that will take place on Jan. 25 at 6 p.m. at St. Bernard’s Auditorium. Tickets are \$160 each or \$1,250 for a table of eight, with all money going to benefit the Christ-like healing mission of St. Bernard’s Healthcare through the St. Bernard’s Foundation. Seating is limited, with organizers expecting some 350 guests.

The celebration will focus on remembering St. Bernard’s past and the impact it has had as the health care system invests in its future. Organizers hope that the once-in-a-lifetime event will honor the



*Top row: 2012 NICU opening, Dr. Douglas Seglem; St. Bernard’s Villa opening; aerial view of St. Bernard’s campus today.
Bottom row: St. Bernard’s Cancer Center renovation; 2016 Kids Rock & Run; Emergency bay today.*

sisters and get everyone excited about the anniversary year. Hytrol will serve as 1900 The Gala’s presenting sponsor for a night that will include a large band, signature cocktail, favors, an emcee and more.

Hospital administrators want to involve St. Bernard’s outlying communities, as well. The hospital will host community celebrations in (at least) Pocahontas and Wynne that include cookouts, free health screenings and face-to-face interaction with doctors. Bezner says these communities have special roles in the healthcare system’s history, and they plan to include them in the celebration however they can.

Closer to the actual July 5 anniversary date, St. Bernard’s will have a special sponsorship with Jonesboro Radio Group’s Freedom Fest fireworks display on July 4. The finale will have heart-shaped fireworks in honor of St. Bernard’s and will lead into the hospital’s official anniversary the following day.

Also in July, Sr. Johanna Marie Melynk, Order of Saint Benedict (OSB), is releasing a book on the 125-year history of St. Bernard’s.

“We already have a detailed book that was written in 2000 by the late Sr. Henrietta Hockle, but Sr. Johanna Marie’s book will incorporate a more casual centerpiece writing style and layout,” said Bezner. “It will include never-before-published photos and also update historically significant events of the past 25 years.”

The hospital has plans for many more surprises and celebratory events throughout the year to benefit St. Bernard’s patients, team members and the community at large.

“(The year) 2025 allows us to appropriately recognize the contributions of all those that have gone before us and to say a special, ‘Thank you,’ to the communities we serve,” said Barber. “This celebration is a year-long event to reflect the unity that so richly enhances the St. Bernard’s legacy.”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Barber cherishes coming to work each day, knowing St. Bernard’s Healthcare is working to impact Jonesboro and the surrounding 23 counties for years to come.

“Each day we come to work, we serve alongside thousands of team members who live our mission,” said Barber. “These incredible individuals then pool their collective training, talents and efforts to care for every person who enters our doors. This work has generational impacts.

“When I think about what St. Bernard’s looked like in Downtown Jonesboro just 10 years ago – since then we have a new tower, new facilities and new services – I can’t imagine what the next 125 will look like. There will be different people filling seats, but I know for certain the sisters’ mission will look the same.”

Bezner feels similarly in that she believes God has great plans in store for St. Bernard’s Healthcare for the next 125 years and beyond.

“I don’t have the ability to run a hospital; it’s not something I searched out, but I do trust and feel that God is working,” said Bezner. “It’s very, very beautiful, and it’s kind of overwhelming sometimes. I trust in the Lord, and I know that is what is happening in my job, and that’s so beautiful to know and to be a part of. ...

“I am excited about some of the things we are doing. I can’t wait to see what the future brings. This is a moment in time to remember what has happened, but such a job to think about what could happen in the next 125 years. It’s unbelievable what God could possibly do. I’m filled with gratitude and looking forward to so many events where we are trying to do things for the community to set the tone for the next 125 years.”

For more information about St. Bernard’s Healthcare and its 125th anniversary, visit stbernards.info.