

CATCHING UP WITH TWO LEADERS FROM THE CLASS OF 2011

By MARIE ROHDE

At first glance it would seem that Sr. Melissa Camardo and Fahad Tahir have little in common. She's a lifelong Catholic from Boston and a member of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (SCL). He is a Muslim from Milwaukee, a layman interested in all religions.

The bond they share is a dedication to the Catholic health care ministry.

In 2011, they were among the first recipients of the Catholic Health Association's "Tomorrow's Leaders" award, a program designed to honor outstanding young leaders in Catholic health care and encourage them to continue their ministries.

As vice president of mission and sponsorship for Exempla Saint Joseph Hospital in Denver, part of the SCL Health System, it is Sr. Camardo's job to keep the spirit and mission of the hospital's founders alive. Sixteen years ago, she was one of 10 sisters working in the hospital. Now there are only three in active ministry at Saint Joseph and two others serving on the hospital board.

The average age of sisters in her community is 74. At 39, she is one of the youngest members of her order.

"If I'm doing my job well, then everyone at Saint Joseph's will be prepared for the day when there isn't a Sister of Charity here, because they will have internalized our heritage and mission," she said.

Tahir, 29, is the chief executive officer for Saint Thomas Physician Services in Nashville, Tenn., a part of Ascension Health. He oversees the business side of the medical practice that has 370 providers in 63 offices.

"The Catholic social teaching guides our ministry, our Catholic health care system, every day," Tahir said.

"We see and care for the poor and the

vulnerable because it is consistent with our social teaching, as it is consistent with our value for human dignity. Those are strong in the Catholic identity, but they are also part of a universal value system that I connect with."

Both Sr. Camardo and Tahir found their callings shortly after finishing college. Sr. Camardo majored in biology as an undergraduate at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and intended to become a medical researcher but said she felt herself being pulled in another



Sr. Camardo

direction — working with the poor. As a sophomore, she went to Honduras to help build a school. Later she went on a mission trip to Mexico to work with the poor. On campus, she became involved in social justice issues.

"I really got to know the woman religious in our campus ministry office," Sr. Camardo said. "She helped those ideas to coalesce, and then I decided to participate in a yearlong volunteer program in Denver, the Colorado Vincentian Volunteers."

There, she met Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, lived in their community, worked as a coordinator in a job train-

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ing program for mothers on welfare and worked in a parenting program. It was on a retreat that it crystallized for her: She was being called. "I decided I couldn't read about it anymore, talk to people about it anymore, I needed to try it," she said.

In 1998, she began a three-year formation program in Kansas City, Kan., before returning to the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth community in Denver. She has worked in several ministries at Exempla Saint Joseph Hospital since 2001 and was named to her current post in 2011.

Currently Sr. Camardo is involved in building a replacement hospital in Denver. "I've been involved in most aspects of the planning on the steering committee, but I am specifically responsible for many of the elements of a healing environment — how can we make it a true healing environment for everyone who walks through those doors?" she said. "There's a particular emphasis on the interior design, the sustainability of the elements of indoor-outdoor space, the whole art program."

Approximately 80 artists are creating work for the new building. "The artwork program alone allows us to live our mission by engaging the community in creating a healing experience," Sr. Camardo said. "This extends our ability to build community, support the arts and the local economy. The art reflects the cultural diversity and geography of our area."

She works with the nearly 4,000 employees, helping them to see their jobs as ministries.

"It's about revealing God's healing love to the people we serve and also to the larger community," Sr. Camardo said. "To enter into your daily work as a minister means you are investing yourself in the activities that you are responsible for. You remember why you



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Being named a young leader was humbling, she said, adding that it made her think more broadly about the community of Catholic health care. “To be able to participate in a dialogue with key leaders in Catholic health care was affirming and inspiring. It helped me see the bigger picture of who we are,” Sr. Camardo said.

Key to the SCL Health System’s mission is serving the poor and focusing on the patient and the patient’s family, even when making decisions on budgets and building new hospitals, she said. Service to the poor is reflected in such efforts as a care network for the uninsured that the hospital is creating. “Our executive team has conversations about justice and charity,” Sr. Camardo said, adding that Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth values are a cornerstone in the decision-making process.

For Tahir, finding his ministry was more happenstance.

After getting an undergraduate degree in finance and economics from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee — he later got a master’s in business administration from Loyola University in Chicago — Tahir landed a job in medical practice management at Columbia St. Mary’s in Milwaukee, part of the Ascension Health system, in 2003. He acknowledged that he knew little about the Catholic role in health

care at the time.

“I was there for seven years, and I just loved it,” he said. “I grew up there — intellectually, professionally and personally.”

By 2011, he had moved to Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C., where he led the development and startup of a medical group practice. He continues to work as an adviser to Providence, but recently he moved to the larger operation in Nashville. There, he leads the clinical, operational and financial management of the physician practices as well as physician recruitment and development.

Providence Hospital has won three Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Innovation Awards totaling more than \$18 million under Tahir’s leadership. The awards were for the



Tahir

development of a clinically integrated network, new payment models for diabetes education and a clinically integrated prenatal care network.

“We look at the patient as a human life that has clinical needs but also psychosocial and emotional needs,” he said. “That requires a deliberateness that is unique to Catholic health care.”

He cited *Differences in Health System Quality Performance by Ownership*, 2010 Thomson Reuters research that reported “Catholic and other church-owned health systems had significantly better quality performance that surpassed investor-owned systems. Catholic health systems are also significantly more likely to provide higher quality performance to the communities served than secular not-for-profit health systems. Investor-owned systems had the lowest performance.” The research focused on Truven Health Analytics’ annual “100 Top Hospitals:

Health System Benchmarks” released in June 2010.

Tahir said understanding that the history of Catholic health care teaches how decisions are made based on ethical standards is important for lay leaders.

“That’s one of the things I fell in love with — understanding the ethical discernment process,” Tahir said. “What it does is it gives you a sequential way of thinking through all the variables that

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impact your decision and impact all of the people involved.”

Although he is not Catholic, he said the Catholic value system resonates with his values. “It is incredibly satisfying,” Tahir said of his work. “It’s the right place for me to do my work.”

The major challenge health care now faces is how to coordinate movement of the patient from hospital to rehabilitation to home or nursing care, Tahir said. “It’s an incredibly complex maze of health care services, and it should work as easily as buying something on Amazon or buying an airline ticket,” he asserted. “We can lead this country through a new and different care delivery system. This is our role and our responsibility to our patients.”

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