

Suburban media fixture to leave for new job

by April E. Fulton
Staff Writer

She rushes around the emergency room doors, ducks under flying TV cameras and hollers to the doctors across the hall, asking where the bloody patient they just wheeled in from a car accident came from and what his condition is.

She runs down the hall to answer her constantly-ringing phone and checks her beeper for new calls, while simultaneously printing out a document from her computer which touts the hospital's latest fundraiser.

It's only 10:30 a.m., but that's Jackie Fishman's usual pace as the public relations director for Suburban Hospital in Bethesda, the only hospital in the county with a shock-trauma unit.

But it's time for a change. Fishman, the two-year veteran of Suburban's public relations office is leaving the hospital for a new job, but not without a few moments of reflection on her personal growth and projections for the future of the health care industry.

At 44, she believes "learned a lot" and "grew a lot" while dealing with the sometimes-overwhelming crush of the news media, who want to know the latest on the gunshot wounded and the car accident fatalities "right now."

As one of nine hospitals in the state designated as a trauma center, Suburban receives the worst-of-the-worst cases of patients with no other chance for survival.

These patients may be journalistic fodder for some, but they are



Bill Crandall/Special to the Gazette

Jackie Fishman

also real people, and as Suburban's spokeswoman, Fishman had to balance the public's need-to-know with the family's privacy concerns and police concerns about disrupting pending investigations.

"I had a couple of bad days. It would be abnormal not to. Basically, I love working with the press, although many (of my peers) find them scary. They've got a lot of chutzpah, but that's their job," Fishman said over burgers (no mayo or mustard) at Houston's in Bethesda on recent day.

The key to public relations, Fishman said, is to know your employer well enough to feel comfortable answering questions and trying to anticipate the questions.

"You're going to be misquoted. You just have to accept it and go

on," Fishman said. She wasn't always so confident, or so sure of what she wanted to do.

Fishman began her career 20-something years ago as a teacher in an inner-city junior high school in Queens, New York after she graduated from SUNY Buffalo with a degree in Journalism/English and an Education minor.

"Teaching was more difficult than I had thought, and it changed my mind," she said.

Fishman and her husband, Robert, moved to Atlanta temporarily, but it wasn't until they moved to South Florida when Fishman found her niche in health care.

"I worked at a PR firm, which mostly worked for real estate companies, but they had one hospital that nobody else really wanted to

do, so I said I'd take it," Fishman said.

Fishman became the spokeswoman for the Florida Medical Center near Ft. Lauderdale in 1984, and loved it.

The Fishmans moved to Potomac for Robert's job as executive director of Israel Bonds, a Bethesda-based development corporation, and Jackie freelanced for publications, including the Gazette, from 1990-93. Then she landed the job at Suburban.

Originally hired as public relations manager under John Davidson, the hospital's communications director, Fishman took on "double-duty" when Davidson left last July after 11 years of service and was not replaced.

"It was scary when he left. I missed his guidance," she said, but looked at the new responsibilities as a challenging opportunity.

In addition to Fishman, the office also has a full-time desktop publisher and an intern, who help produce the hospital's massive mailings on community events and outreach programs, as well as press releases for reporters.

With the phones ringing, her beeper going off and rumors of reporters in a patient's room without authorization, Fishman is constantly on the go.

It was not uncommon for her children, Hebra, 16 and Josh, 9, to see their mom rush off in the middle of dinner to answer her beeper during some crisis.

Fishman counts the suicide in front of the hospital last fall as the hardest time for her. She said Feb-

ruary's fatal Amtrak train wreck, while she was on vacation, as the most trying time for the hospital.

"Dealing with the human drama and the kinds of injuries were different (than in Florida). There's more emergencies here."

Emergencies are what Suburban does best, but are they enough to keep the private hospital afloat in the health care revolution?

Fishman said the hospital will always have a place in the county because of the base of community support surrounding it, but it has begun to change with the times: Suburban opened three new outpatient physical therapy centers in the last year.

"It's still too early to tell the effects of the HMOs (on private hospitals), but it would behoove the health care industry to keep people as healthy as possible ... to keep future costs of care down," Fishman said.

Fishman starts as the public affairs director at the American Society for Health System Pharmacists on May 1, where she will be in charge of interns, newsletters and getting information out.

Elizabeth Hall, a former spokeswoman for the American Red Cross, will take over as communications director at Suburban.

Gina Johnson, program director for community outreach at Suburban, said she and Fishman worked well together on coordinating seminars and health fairs for the public.

"I wish her all the success in the world. I hear wonderful things about (Hall) and I look forward to working with her," she said.

... on spring productions