

A conversation with

Kathryn Hughes

Before Kathryn Hughes could make a name for the Arlington hospital that hired her, she had to decide which name to give it

By Neil Adler, Staff Reporter

"I'm a change agent," Kathryn Hughes says, flashing a smile that's almost always on display.

Good thing, since change is pretty much the word of the day at **Virginia Hospital Center**, which in recent years has changed its brand, its image and its name (it used to be called **Arlington Hospital**).

Those changes culminated in November with a new \$150 million hospital. Hughes, instrumental in much of the change, doesn't shy away from unconventional steps to get the job done.



She hired a consumer research giant and called on a well-known hospitality company to help with the hospital's image and come up with an appropriate name. Hughes did countless hours of research to get a sense of what the hospital was all about and where the organization needed to go.

But the hard work seems to have paid off. Out to dinner recently, Hughes overheard people praising the hospital, for its new name and new facility. Her face lights up as she recalls the story.

The hospital has completed its transformation from a sleepy neighborhood provider into a technologically advanced regional center, and now all eyes are watching to see if it can meet its lofty goals: Keep room occupancy and admissions up. Continue to recruit doctors. Expand the demographic market. Introduce new services.

Hughes, a health care marketing veteran who joined the hospital in 2000, isn't shying away from the attention.

Why did you get into health care marketing?

My father was a physician. I had uncles and cousins in health care. Early on, my family asked if I would become a nurse. I do want to serve, but I'm not good at taking blood, those kinds of things. But I wanted to interact and be in that industry.

What were officials looking for when you interviewed?

They brought me onboard in anticipation of the new building project. When I came on, it was still plans on paper. They said, "We want to make sure the beautiful physical environment certainly matches and mirrors a wonderful superior brand in the region. Can you do that for us?" And I said, "Absolutely." It was a great fit.

I told them that this is a different environment for me [than the for-profit world]. I candidly said to them, "I'm a change agent. If you don't want change, don't hire me."

What had to change in the hospital's marketing department?

You can't work in marketing in a silo. It has to work hand in hand with other departments. [The hospital] never had that before. They heard me out. I said it needed to be an executive position. And they brought me onboard. They had no idea what they wanted. They said, "You're the expert." At first it was me and an intern. Now there's 14 of us, broken up into different areas.

Were you nervous taking on such a large task?

No, because I had done that before. I said I needed to spend the first two months doing my own due diligence. I wanted to interview employees, patients and doctors. I needed to be a sponge, absorb stuff. After two months it was very clear. The hospital wasn't getting its due. It had wonderful doctors. Wonderful and compassionate care. Phenomenal technology. But no one ever told anyone.

How did you decide on the name Virginia Hospital Center?

I brought in Nielsen, the research firm, to get a great gauge of what Arlington Hospital was at that time. The new name wasn't on the table at first. Consumers that knew us thought good of us for basic health care needs. But it was a very small circle that knew of us. Beyond the four-block radius, we didn't have great awareness.

The perceptions were misperceptions about the hospital. No one had touted the fantastic physicians and technology and specialties unique to this hospital. The name Arlington Hospital didn't have the right connotations. We tested Arlington Hospital with four other names. ... Virginia Hospital Center resonated four times greater than Arlington Hospital.

Obviously we needed to change something. But to change a 56-year-history is tough, and you don't do it overnight.

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