One busy day in May, David Ross, JD/MHA ’85, president of Barnes–Jewish St. Peters Hospital in Missouri, made his rounds on the patient floors. One nurse told him she had admitted 23 patients that day. Because of his own experience 25 years ago as a unit secretary admitting patients at a hospital, Ross knew that was a demanding number of admissions. “She didn’t realize I had that experience,” he says. “I think she was pleased that I understood her job, that I knew what she had been through that day.”

In addition to his experience working on a hospital floor, Ross worked as a hospital housekeeper and architectural draftsman during summers while earning his bachelor’s degree in history at Yale University. There’s probably one more thing that the admissions nurse didn’t know about this hospital president: He is also a lawyer.

Ross came to Washington University in 1981 specifically to earn double degrees in law and health care administration. He journeyed west to St. Louis from his native Boston, crossing flat lands and driving parallel to cornfields, all unfamiliar to him.

He chose to pursue both degrees for several reasons. Because his father is a lawyer and his uncle a hospital administrator, he knew that the two professions are “arguably more protected than other professions from economic upturns and downturns. People are going to need lawyers, and, unfortunately, people are going to be sick.” Having both degrees, he calculated, would also distinguish him from other candidates for jobs. From a legal point of view, he thought, having a degree in hospital administration would make him a better health care lawyer; concomitantly, being a lawyer would make him a more skillful administrator.

As an administrator, Ross spends virtually all of his time at Barnes–Jewish St. Peters. “I don’t put on my lawyer’s hat as an administrator, but my legal background does help me assess situations, negotiate issues, and interpret contracts,” he says. “It would be a mistake to assume I keep up with...
legal knowledge, but I do read up on health care law, specifically. I have enough legal background to ask the important questions—if not answer them—at an earlier point in the process.”

For example, he cites a recent case at Barnes-Jewish St. Peters regarding an employee whose performance was coming under scrutiny. When Ross examined the worker’s 10-year-old contract, he found “it had been poorly drawn.” At one point, the contract allowed termination with 60 days’ notice in writing; later on, the language says either party could terminate the contract with 60 days notice prior to annual renewal. He alerted the hospital’s legal department of the contract’s discrepancies.

Ross’ own legal experience came after graduation. He practiced law from 1986 to 1987 at the Chicago firm of Katten Muchin and Zavis, where he was able to gather experience in health care law, partly because the headquarters of both the American Medical Association and the American Hospital Association are located in Chicago. Of the 300 lawyers then at the firm, 25–30 specialized in health care law.

“Corporate law was not a good fit with my values,” Ross admits. “I wanted a job where I could give something back to the community.”

After consulting with recruiters, Ross landed a job as chief executive officer of Ellsworth Municipal Hospital, a 42-bed hospital in Iowa Falls, Iowa. “That really set my career path,” he says.

He became executive director of regional system integration at the North Iowa Mercy Health Center, a 350-bed rural referral site in Mason City, Iowa, in 1988.

Then, from 1996 to September 2002, Ross served as chief executive officer of Phelps County Regional Medical Center, a 240-bed hospital in Rolla, Missouri. There, he learned something important about himself. “A senior leader told me that when I said ‘Hi’ to someone, I was perceived to ‘move on too quickly to hear the response.’ From then on, I made a conscious decision to sit down and listen to people.”

Ross, who became president of Barnes-Jewish St. Peters in March 2003, tries to pass on what he’s learned. “I tell the nurses to turn around before they leave a patient’s room, look the patient in the eye, and say, ‘Is there anything else I can do for you? I have the time.’ Ninety-nine percent of the time the answer will be ‘no,’ but the patient will feel attended to. That perception matters because no job is more important than identifying customers’ needs and meeting them.

“I expect a lot out of our employees,” he adds, “but they expect a lot of me.”

He figures that he spends about 20 percent of his time visiting different departments, 30 percent interacting with physicians (“across their desks, too, not just in my office”), 20 percent in community events, and 30 percent in actual administration and strategy.

He also spends about five hours a month at the BJC home office. “BJC provides me with a fair amount of autonomy, but we have to integrate our budget with the system. Barnes-Jewish St. Peters is a vital component of that system.” The 111-bed St. Peters hospital is mid-sized, like Rolla’s, with about a $200-million annual operating budget. He currently is overseeing an $18.5-million expansion project and looks forward to increasing services at the hospital.

“Health care administration is an excellent professional fit for my values and personality,” he says. “While both challenging and fast-paced, it also affords me an opportunity to collaborate with our medical staff and community to make a difference and save lives.”

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Barnes-Jewish St. Peters is undergoing an $18.5-million expansion.