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Former St. Joseph's CEO 'truly remarkable leader'



Abigail Cukier

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April 29, 2013

Inspiring, compassionate and a leader. That is how Sister Joan O'Sullivan is remembered.

The former executive director of St. Joseph's Hospital, Hamilton, died April 27 in her 67th year as a [Sister of St. Joseph](#).

"She had a unique ability to inspire people. I never remember her raising her voice. She let you know in other ways if she didn't like an idea. She had a look that didn't need a lot of translating," says Brian Guest with a laugh.

"There weren't many women in these positions then. She was the CEO of a major teaching hospital. For her, everything was about the patient – what was best for the patient, especially those who were disadvantaged. Of course, we had rules and we had to stay within budget. But it was about doing the best for the patient. You would worry about the consequences later."

Guest, who is senior vice-president, corporate renewal and mission for [St. Joseph's Health System](#), worked with Sister O'Sullivan for many years.

Born in Hamilton, Sister O'Sullivan graduated from Cathedral Girls High School and the St. Joseph's Hospital School of Nursing. She is also a graduate of the [University of Western Ontario](#), holding a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree and a Master of Science in Nursing Administration. Sister O'Sullivan was honoured as Irish Canadian Citizen of the Year in 1987 and Woman of the Year in Health Care in 1990.

After working as a private duty, general staff and industrial nurse, she entered the



Sister Joan O'Sullivan (far right) joined Lincoln Alexander at the 2006 launch of his autobiography "Go to School, You're a little Black Boy", joined by Sister Patricia Hanlon and Sister Teresa Carmel.

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Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Hamilton in 1946. She was director of nursing in St. Mary's General Hospital (Kitchener), St. Joseph's Hospital (Guelph) and St. Joseph's Hospital (Hamilton). Prior to her appointment as executive director of St. Joseph's Hospital Hamilton in 1979, Sister O'Sullivan was assistant executive director of St. Joseph's Hospital Brantford and executive director of St. Mary's General Hospital, Kitchener.

As director of St. Joe's Hamilton, Sister O'Sullivan oversaw the construction of a 20-bed regional dialysis centre, the planning and construction of a \$57-million hospital redevelopment and the planning and construction of the St. Joseph's Community Health Centre, now King Campus in Stoney Creek.

Another of Sister O'Sullivan's achievements was to start medical missions to developing communities to build healthcare capacity and academic knowledge. [This work](#) continues and missions have travelled to Russia, Yemen, Israel, Haiti, Uganda and the Sudan.

"There have always been compassionate healthcare providers doing this sort of thing, but no other hospital was doing it in as organized fashion," said Guest. "We never used public money for this. This speaks to her compassion for those less fortunate. She saw that, yes, we have challenges, but we have so much."

Guest acknowledges that Sister O'Sullivan had to make some difficult decisions.

"It's not an easy business, but she handled herself with compassion and dignity at all times," he said.

"She could have still succeeded today. She never relaxed in her own need to learn and adapt to the changing environment. She was a truly remarkable leader."

The Sisters of St. Joseph will welcome family and friends at St. Joseph's Convent Hamilton May 1, 2 p.m.-4 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m. A vigil service will be held at 7 p.m. at St. Joseph's Motherhouse. Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated at St. Joseph's Convent, Motherhouse May 2 at 10:30 a.m.

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