

Mattie's Millions

In 1897, Mattie Mallory changed trains in Oklahoma Territory and had a life-changing encounter with the orphans at the station. The 36-year-old founded an orphanage that became today's Bethany Children's Health Center, which is now Bethany's largest employer and where thousands of medically fragile children receive individualized treatment and rehabilitation every year.

BY LORI WILLIAMS

WITH ONLY A GOLD watch and strong resolve, Mattie Mallory made a down payment in the late 1800s that would become a \$60 million investment more than 100 years later. What started in 1898 as two rented rooms to house orphans in Oklahoma Territory is now Bethany's largest employer at the sprawling Bethany Children's Health Center complex in its park-like setting on Route 66.

How this journey unfolded is as much a lesson in overcoming what Mallory called "almost impossible" as it is a primer in entrepreneurship. She was part bootstrapper, part city planner and 100% devoted to her calling.

At first, Mallory fed four orphans at a time around a tiny sewing table in rooms on Fifth Street, and then she and her brood decamped to a brick building at Walker and Pottawatomie. At 36, she sold land in her home state of Kansas and made a down payment on 20 acres near 27th Street and Classen Boulevard. Things moved rapidly thereafter: the formation of the Oklahoma and Indian Territory Rescue and Orphanage Commission, the platting of Beulah Heights, and the construction of the Oklahoma Orphanage, a rescue home and a Bible School.

Mallory weathered four moves and an orphanage-wide outbreak of Cuban measles. The trifecta of orphanage, rescue home and school proved too much, so the astute businesswoman capitalized on an offer from the El Reno Interurban Railway Company to trade the Beulah Heights property for

80 acres west of the city. She gave 10 and sold 20 acres to a school (now Southern Nazarene University), withdrew from the faculty, and relinquished management of the rescue home. Monies from the land sale as well as interest earned from a loan of \$5,000 helped underwrite her remaining ministry at the Oklahoma Orphanage. In 1909, Mattie and three other representatives committed and platted the 80 acres and named it Bethany.

In the 1940s, the orphanage became a convalescent center for polio victims. In the 1970s, it became a rehabilitation hospital for children with complex disabilities. It was also a time of financial crisis.

"When Albert Gray, my predecessor and our current chairman of the board, was brought in to close down the hospital, people thought it was the end of our story, but that's not what God had planned," said Nico Gomez, Bethany Children's Health Center CEO.

In fact, doors opened, not closed. Albert took on the mowing and painting jobs and gave the staff raises. His sister Carol, the volunteer coordinator, took charge of the laundry. And then, 100 years after Mattie's first down payment, the hospital opened an 82,000-square-foot complex with 100 inpatient beds, courtesy of a \$9.77 million grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.



Top: The facility began as an orphanage decades before Oklahoma became a state. In the 1940s, the orphanage became a convalescent center for polio victims.

Above: Today, the \$60 million valued complex employs about 800 people, making it Bethany's largest employer.



In 2020, the hospital cared for almost 300 children and 2,800 more children were treated at the outpatient clinic.

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—Nico Gomez, Bethany Children’s Health Center CEO.

Mattie’s Legacy

In 2017, the hospital grew by 100,000 square feet by adding a four-story patient bed tower and parking structure. Hospital employees contributed \$1 million towards the \$22 million capital campaign project. These numbers seem large, even impersonal. But it’s very personal for patients like Jasper, who dons a pair of new glasses and utilizes his own personal communication device with the assistance of Matt, his special education teacher. Every child at this hospital has his or her own communication device. Every child is heard.

And every kid gets to be a kid. In the new Adaptive Recreation and Fine Arts Center, kids can

board a school bus, visit Mattie’s Diner, sit for a school picture, and experience a setting that’s just like home. This space is irresistible, but its purpose goes deeper, Gomez said.

“Even before kids get here,” Gomez said, “we’re thinking about how to serve them and how to give them a smooth transition when they leave. The new Center helps prepare our kids for that transition.”

Forward thinking also led to the opening of a community pharmacy in 2020, he said.

“Many of our kids need compounded medications, but there aren’t many compounding pharmacies,” Gomez said. “Now our kids can get the meds they need when they’re discharged. We

drop ship medications, but the pharmacy also has a drive-thru. We get to serve the community at large, which helps underwrite our work at the hospital.”

In 2020, the hospital provided inpatient care for 287 children and adolescents with complicated disabilities; the outpatient clinics treated more than 2,800 children. About 800 employees work at the Center, making it Bethany’s largest employee. The property and buildings are valued now at more than \$60 million. Plans are in the works now to expand outpatient services, telemedicine, and lodging for families at a projected cost of \$130 million. ■