A Strong Sense of Service

F. Elliott (Sonny) Burch, Jr. and his brother Donald (Buddy) talked about how four generations of their family took an active role in the community since the start of the family business in 1928. “My father taught Buddy and me about giving back to the community just as his father taught him,” said Sonny, who has passed along this same lesson to his children and on down the line.

One way that F. Elliott Burch, Sr., son of one of the original founders of Burch Oil, served his neighbors was through community service. After graduating from the Charlotte Hall Military Academy (CHMA), he joined the family business. He served on numerous boards such as the CHMA, St. Mary’s Hospital and Cedar Lane Apartments for the Elderly to name a few. He was elected to serve as a St. Mary’s County Commissioner from 1962 to 1970, serving as president during his second term.

Following in his father’s footsteps, Sonny served on the St. Mary’s Hospital Board of Directors from 2002 to 2007. “I remember when we added the third floor to the hospital,” he said. “We knew the county was growing and that the hospital would need to grow with it.” He also said it was an honor to serve with “people who were and are dedicated to this hospital and this community. But it’s always been like that in the county.” During Sonny’s last year on the board he served as its president.

“People here want to help each other,” said Buddy. “We all grew up together. Our families knew each other.” As an example, he told the story about how the Burch brothers used to play ball with Dr. John Roache, who is on the hospital’s Medical Staff. “He was the catcher,” said Buddy, and for some reason everyone on the team used to call him ‘Yogi’ after the great New York Yankee, Yogi Beara.”

In addition, Sonny talked about Dr. Roy Guyther who used to be his family physician. He spoke about how Dr. Guyther was named Family Physician of the Year. The Maryland State Medical Journal ran a cover photo of Dr. Guyther and three children in an exam room in August 1982. “Those were my kids,” said Sonny. “We just happened to be in Dr. Guyther’s office when the photographer showed up.”

Sonny’s daughter, Sheri Burch Norris, chose to continue her father’s legacy by serving on the Hospital Foundation board. “Things have changed so much since I was on the Foundation,” she said. “I served during the earliest years of the Foundation’s Gala and we didn’t even hold the event in the county then.” She added that in subsequent years the event was held at the Harry Lundberg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Md. “We used to “beg, borrow and steal” decorations for the event at the time and it was difficult to raise significant dollars. It wasn’t anywhere
Family Matters

When Sarah Mason Milburn came to work as a nurse’s aide in 1981, she wasn’t thinking about how it might impact future generations within her family. She just wanted a job. “I’d worked at the nursing home and needed a change,” she said. So, Sarah decided to follow her sister Mary Alberta’s advice and talked to Mrs. Lane, the nursing supervisor at the time.

“Mrs. Lane asked me a few questions then said she’d be pleased to put me on her staff at St. Mary’s Hospital. I told her I’d be doubly pleased to accept,” said Sarah, who started working on the weekends. She then worked the evening shift for many years, doing “the bedpan boogey” as the aides used to call it. Sarah worked wherever she was needed but she especially loved her assignment with the Obstetrical Unit the last few years before she retired in 1994.

Mary Alberta (Bert) knew to send Sarah to Mrs. Lane because she worked in the hospital’s kitchen for 29 years, many of those as the cook. She started in the old hospital in 1966 and got to know just about everyone over time. “I worked about every position in the kitchen but I always loved cooking,” commented Bert. “When our cook Maizie Blackston passed away I spoke up and told everyone I wanted that job. I figured if I cooked the food for them and did it right that they would love it,” recalled Bert. And love it they did. Even today, associates at the hospital recall her homemade recipes, especially her bread pudding.

She may be retired, but Bert still loves to cook. Now it is for special family occasions or holidays such as Easter. Bert rents a place large enough to hold the multi-generational family members and cooks dinner for them all.

There is one patient for whom Bert’s homemade cooking made a tremendous difference. She was delivering menus on the patient floors and she noticed he hadn’t eaten any of his previous meals, so she started to talk to him. She said he was told that he only had so long to live so he gave up even trying. Bert went back to the kitchen and made that patient some homemade chicken soup, adding lots of love to it.

“When I brought him the soup, he couldn’t believe I had cooked just for him,” she remembered. “I watched as he took some and then some more. He finished it all.” The patient went on to recover and years later returned to the hospital just so he could find Bert and thank her.

“We had a lot of fun in addition to all the hard work,” the sisters remarked. Except for one Christmas Day when Bert worked a double shift because the entire evening shift had called in sick, she was grateful for the job. Her first paycheck in 1966 was $45.

But the legacy of employment with the hospital didn’t stop with these two of the five surviving Mason sisters. Sarah’s daughter and granddaughter followed in her footsteps.

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When she left, she was earning $5.25 an hour.

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