



From Nurse to General Counsel: How Mary Rotunno's Passion for Service Led Her to Healthcare Law

Career Development



Albert Schweitzer, a French-German theologian, organist, philosopher, and physician, once said, “The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.” Mary Rotunno, general counsel of El Camino Hospital in Silicon Valley, has made this her lifelong mantra throughout her 30-year career in healthcare. “Overall, my career has been motivated by my passion for service and helping others,” Rotunno says. “Starting with my desire to be a nurse since I was a young child and continuing through my journey to a healthcare attorney and general counsel, I’ve found a path through community service.” Rotunno’s journey is a perfect example of how to forge an unconventional, passion-fueled legal career path.

Past life as a nurse

Volunteering at the local hospital in high school made a profound impression on Rotunno. “We were known as ‘candy strippers’ back then,” she describes. “The term candy stripper is derived from the red-and-white striped pinafores that volunteers wore, because of their resemblances to candy canes. You don’t really see that anymore.” This volunteer work plunged Rotunno deep into the world of healthcare and ignited her passion for service. “We did everything back then — held babies in the nursery, worked in the pediatric playroom, delivered meal trays, and provided assistance with feeding patients,” she says. “It was very hands on and much more than what hospital volunteers can do now. And I found serving others very enjoyable.”

Rotunno’s passion to serve initially led her to a very different career. “I wanted to be a nurse since I was seven or eight because I wanted to help people,” Rotunno explains. “My dad was hospitalized for back problems for weeks at a time. I was very impressed with the nurses. They were always there. They were always helpful and developed a relationship with their patients.” Before law school, she followed her dreams and worked as a pediatric nurse.

Medical legal clinic: Addressing a need

Throughout her successful career, Rotunno has never lost her volunteer spirit. She regularly volunteers with her husband and two teenage children serving meals to the homeless at Glide Memorial Church. During her 11-year career at Dignity Health, Rotunno learned the values of social justice, dignity, and how to be a “servant leader” with humility and gratitude. “I was fortunate to participate in the three-year Ministry Leadership Program, which inspired me to establish the Medical Legal Clinic at St. Mary’s Medical Center in San Francisco,” she says. “Through this work I learned to understand the social determinants of health and how certain populations are at risk for health problems based on their socioeconomic status, which is an important factor in population health management.”

In collaboration with The Bar Association of San Francisco and several law firm sponsors, the Medical Legal Clinic provides onsite legal services to the patients at a St. Mary’s Medical Center outpatient clinic for low income patients one day a week. The goal is to help patients who can’t afford an attorney obtain legal advice to address their legal concerns so they can focus on their health. According to Rotunno, “Many studies have demonstrated what is called ‘social determinants of health.’ Improving social conditions highly correlates with patients’ likelihood to address their medical problems.” The clinic allowed Rotunno to combine her legal training and passion for service to fill a need.

Leading the creation of the Medical Legal Clinic was pivotal in Rotunno’s career. “This was the first time I took an idea and implemented it from start to finish. The clinic’s success inspired me to become general counsel. I knew that I was ready. If I could bring a legal clinic to life, I could run a legal department,” she explains. “It was an amazing experience that had a positive impact on my community and my career. I discovered my strengths: my ability to deliver and forge partnerships.”

Path to general counsel

Over the course of her career Rotunno has learned to take new opportunities. “These opportunities pushed me outside of my comfort zone and provided the most growth personally and professionally,” she says. “This started when I decided to work as a travelling nurse taking temporary assignments at various hospitals throughout the United States and led to my transition from a career in nursing to law school.” Although nursing and lawyering are very different, they’re similar in one key aspect: commitment to service. The adventurous transition from serving patients to serving clients was natural for Rotunno.

After Rotunno graduated from law school, she was still interested in healthcare, but did not want to pursue the obvious medical malpractice route. Instead, she became a commercial litigator with a preference for regulatory work. She eventually decided to transition in-house. All along, she kept her goals of a career in healthcare in mind. “I accepted my first in-house position at Beverly Enterprises in Fort Smith, Arkansas,” she says. “It was not anywhere that I had planned to live. However, my three years of experience at Beverly enabled me to transition my career from a litigation attorney to a healthcare attorney.”

After years of working in-house for healthcare and medical device companies, Rotunno accepted the position at El Camino Hospital for the opportunity and challenge of a GC role at a high quality, innovative community hospital.

“I am very happy where I am today,” Rotunno says. She considers her role as general counsel an

indispensable part of a well-run health system. “I very much enjoy supporting the board, governance, strategy, and compliance — all of which are very prominent in my practice,” she says. The relationship is mutually beneficial. As Rotunno helps El Camino Hospital grow, she is serving the local community. “I am learning about board governance while providing legal advice to two boards, the nonprofit El Camino Hospital Board, and the publicly-elected El Camino Healthcare District Board,” she says. “I also provide legal support to several Board Advisory Committees, which consist of Board members and community experts. It is a lot of boards to support!” In the process she is learning the value of collaboration and partnership. Rotunno admits, “I continuously remind myself of the recently quoted African proverb that says, ‘If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.’”

Rotunno’s work with El Camino Hospital also keeps her connected to the future of healthcare. As a member of the hospital’s executive leadership team, she is learning about future healthcare delivery models and population health management. “I am on the cutting edge of healthcare issues as El Camino Hospital is developing an integrated healthcare delivery network to provide services along the continuum of care and manage population health for the Silicon Valley community,” she says. Although this “cutting edge” medicine is a far cry from Rotunno’s candy striper days, she continues to live out her passion of serving others — on an even wider scale. Her work with El Camino Hospital provides a bird’s-eye view of the community’s healthcare needs and the impact of ongoing changes in healthcare reimbursement from a volume to value model. “In the next few years, we will improve the delivery of medical services and I am thrilled to be in the middle of these changes,” Rotunno explains. “For example, population health management requires active management of a patient from pre-hospitalization, during hospitalization, and post-hospitalization. I am excited to help El Camino Hospital during this exciting transition.”

Looking back on her career, Rotunno is grateful for the opportunities to grow and serve. Her unconventional but bold path from nurse to general counsel is a prime example of how to integrate existing interests into a legal career. Her passion for service led her to the healthcare industry, and her legal career gave her the power and resources to impact community health on an even wider scale. “I feel truly blessed to have enjoyed these wonderful opportunities to serve throughout my career and life,” she says. “Isn’t living a life that makes a positive impact in the community, while staying true to your own purpose, by definition, a blessing?”

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

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