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## New pharmacy focuses on long-term care



Amanda Berry, a pharmacy technician at Guardian Pharmacy, St. Cloud, fills an order for a customer Feb. 16. Guardian caters to long-term care facilities and their patients in Central Minnesota and beyond. / Kimm Anderson, [kanderson@stcloudtimes.com](mailto:kanderson@stcloudtimes.com)



Written by  
**Kevin Allenspach**

Mark Boe is 50 years old, ripe for a major life change.

Last year, he found himself unemployed after working for 17 years in St. Cloud. For the past five years, he had been a category manager for Coborn's and was most recently in charge of its long-term pharmacy. When Coborn's elected to close the physical location and move the work to its various grocery store locations, Boe was among the employees who were let go.

He was lying awake at night wondering what I was going to do next," said Boe, who graduated from Morningside College in 1985 and lived in Sioux City, Iowa, until he moved to Minnesota to work for Dawn Food Products.



Guardian Pharmacy's Mark Boe tells how he came to work for the new pharmacy business which caters to long-term care facility patients in the area. / Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com

He was a 20-year food guy. But I fell in love with the concept of long-term care pharmacy as a business."

During a previous trip to attend a pharmaceutical convention in Las Vegas, he wound up at a dinner seated next to the business development manager for Guardian Pharmacy, an Atlanta-based company with 17 partnerships in 11 states.

It was a fateful thing," said Boe, who lives in Sartell. "This guy had talked to me about working for them and, while I put it off, he kept calling me quarterly. When he found out I wasn't working in the business anymore, he asked me, "What are you going to do?" I said "Maybe this sounds crazy, but I want to start a long-term care pharmacy here."

He flew to Atlanta to meet with Guardian people, and they flew here as each side did its due diligence.

It was frightening for someone who spent most of his career in a grocery store setting and really knows nothing about pharmacy. But the fundamentals were there," he said.

Whether his goal was to move fresh produce or satisfy long-term care pharmacy clients - primarily nursing homes and assisted-living centers - Boe knew he could do it if he delivered the right product in the right package at the right price and in the right distribution time."

So, with a personal stake at several hundred thousand dollars, and a majority investment by Guardian, Boe last month was able to launch his operation in a relatively nondescript business center in south St. Cloud. He has a five-year lease on a 4,200-square-foot facility, about 10 employees and plans to double that total by the end of the year.

Now, the married father of two sons and two daughters is owner and president of the St. Cloud operation.

Southern influence

Guardian Pharmacy launched its business in 2004 and added five new pharmacies in 2011 - boosting revenue by 35 percent.

"We've got a dense footprint in the Southeast," said Fred Burke, Guardian's CEO and co-founder. "So it's a good question: What's a bunch of slow-talking southern boys doing in Minneso-o-o-o-ota? The short answer is we look for a special breed of cat, an entrepreneur who can run their own show within our business model. The most important element is the right partner. Not some market research."

Burke said there are other long-term care pharmacy options in Minnesota, "but we think our model provides a better level of service."

Staff are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to ensure rapid response and good communication with care providers. While Boe's operation is autonomous from the other Guardian pharmacies, he receives "back-end" support at no charge for day-to-day business operations like payroll, human resources and information technology. Boe also can collaborate with any of the other Guardian operations to update best practices and get access to the latest technology - like bar-code scanning of the packages to ensure they're distributed to the right patient.

"It's a joint venture," Burke said. "Guardian has a percentage and Mark has a percentage and, over time, he is the sole owner. He understands the needs of the local market and can tailor his business to that. We're not the biggest company in the industry, but we don't want to have a cookie-cutter approach."

Burke said 5 percent of all pharmaceutical sales can be attributed to long-term care, a market valued at \$6 billion nationwide annually.

"It's very different from what you think of in a pharmacy," Burke said. "In a retail store, an ambulatory patient walks in, gets their prescription filled in a vial, gets in the car and drives home."

No typical pharmacy

Guardian is not open to the public. Other than a small sign and a name on the door, you wouldn't know it's there. Because there are a lot of drugs on the site, security prompts a low profile. Boe can't even access his own office unless a pharmacist is there to enter an access code into an alarm system.

Boe said he'd be looking for more pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, administrative help, as well as delivery and sales personnel.

On a recent day, as brilliant sunshine shone through tall windows at one end of a long, open room that dominates his building, employees were packaging drugs for shipment. Medication can be packaged individually, by wing of a nursing home or in whatever manner makes distribution easiest and safest.

A fleet of three minivans can make deliveries around the region, from Alexandria to Brainerd and Hutchinson to the northwestern edge of Minneapolis. In addition to serving the elderly nursing home population, Guardian also works with group homes, behavioral health facilities and correctional institutions. In Minnesota, there are more than 1,000 long-term care facilities, with more than 70,000 residents.

Guardian also coordinates use of special medication carts, dispensers and even iPads to help providers with medication distribution and communication. Boe's business also is capable of supervised medication destruction, for disposal of unused drugs.

I'm very fortunate in that my former co-workers, customers and vendors all stayed in touch with me and are helping make this a success, he said. I dabbled in the stock market before and I don't care if I put another penny into a retirement account. I made this decision to invest in me and something I wanted to do. It's been a journey of faith. My prayers were that, as I went out to talk to people to find out if this was something that would fly, I'd get doors slammed in my face or spit on or whatever. That way it would've been obvious if I shouldn't do it.

But you know what? The opposite happened. I was met with warm encouragement. That's why I don't feel like I'm orchestrating this. That first phone call where this became a possibility was seven months ago. You don't go from that to this unless something greater is at work.+