

# Suited Up *for the* Long Haul

NCH CEO DR. ALLEN WEISS IS COMMITTED TO A HEALTHY, EDUCATED COMMUNITY.

**A**n alphabet of acronyms surrounds Dr. Allen Weiss's name, representing the long, distinguished career he has had since moving to Naples in 1977 and joining NCH Healthcare System. It doesn't, however, give any insight into the stethoscope-wielding, suit-wearing man who heads up the only 5-star rated hospital in Southwest Florida. That's a little harder to decipher.

Weiss, the middle of three sons, grew up in what he called an "Ozzie and Harriet-type home," and was raised by hardworking parents. Early on, he watched his father, a high school vice principal who also operated a home-based advertising business, blend his work and home life.

"My mom worked at home ... my older brother and younger brother age-appropriately

helped out in the business ... work and home life were interdigitated," Allen said of his childhood, recalling the home had two different phone lines, one for the business and one for personal use. "I still combine things and think that's normal."

He easily shares tales of his rise from being a modest student to becoming a leader in medicine, but calls it a stroke of good fortune.

"I was socially not that mature and not that good of a student," he said, recalling that once he got a D on a six-week grading period in English. Nowadays, as the CEO and president of NCH Healthcare System, Weiss writes about 100 articles a year, like his weekly NCH Straight Talk and other articles for medical magazines, journals and newspapers.

"Some of them are pretty good," he adds with a laugh.

He had a gift for the sciences, even in high school and as an undergraduate, but, once Weiss got to Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, that gift blossomed. It showed up when he took a biology assessment test as an undergraduate.

"I was off the chart. It was very unusual for that to happen," Weiss said.

Then he met his wife, Marla Weiss. They married during his senior year of medical school in 1972. Their early married life was spent together, with Allen serving as an intern, then a resident at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City.

"It was great training," said the doctor. "I got used to being around really smart people, hardworking people."

By 1977, the young couple, who had grown tired of the cold winters in New York City,

Allen Weiss, president and CEO of NCH Healthcare System, frequently shares interesting updates via blogs and vlogs featuring life-saving techniques and state-of-the-art equipment such as the Siemens Artis Q Imaging system, located in the hospital's cardiac "cath lab."



STORY BY LEIGH TAHIROVIC  
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moved south. They had one daughter and Marla was pregnant when they discovered an up-and-coming town with warm weather. It was a perfect place for Allen to open a private practice specializing in rheumatology. The family found a home on Bougainvillea Road, blocks away from NCH's downtown hospital in Naples, and Allen rented a small space where he charged patients \$20 for an office visit.

"That was the total amount," Allen added. "The town was nice then. I was like doctor [No.] 58. ... We had two kids in the house, a nice social life with other young families."

But Allen said the state of our health wasn't the best, calling it "so-so." He

remembers a doctor who smoked a big cigar while making rounds in the hospital. At medical society meetings, it was common for dinner to be an oversized porterhouse steak while a speaker would advise the physicians in the audience that smoking was probably not good and over-drinking wasn't either.

Allen took his first step toward changing that mindset at NCH once he became CEO in 2006 and implemented changes in the nonprofit's approach to its own health care. Over time, NCH stopped hiring smokers and introduced employee incentives to undergo adult-recommended medical screenings like mammograms and colonoscopies.

"We picked up a ton of stuff: high blood pressure, diabetes and we started treating people," said the doctor.

At first, health care costs at NCH, which is self-insured, spiked. Then, they declined again and again — almost to the tune of \$24 million in the last few years.

"We've got these healthier people and we're saving money while health care costs are going up across the country," Allen explained.

But it wasn't enough for Allen. He wants the rest of Collier County to be healthier, too.

"Twelve years ago, we did the Wellness Center ... but the problem with an exercise place is you get

(Top left) Allen and Marla Weiss at the NCH Garden of Hope and Courage on the Naples campus.

(Above) Allen Weiss is surrounded by cover articles that feature him as well as medical illustrations from one of his two adult daughters — both of whom became physicians — on the walls of his office in downtown Naples.

CREDIT (TOP LEFT): TAMARA SWITKEN; CREDIT (ABOVE): LANE WILKINSON PHOTOGRAPHY

the healthy people healthier. You don't get the 60 percent in the middle who you really want to move in the right direction," explained Allen.

The Blue Zones Project, on the other hand, is just the right initiative that will push those 60 percenters to a healthier way of living, and Allen thinks it's the answer to our nation's health care problems.

"Right now, we are getting paid for sickness," he said, pointing out that if there was a value-based payment system where doctors are paid to keep people healthy, instead of getting paid when a patient is sick, there would be a dramatic change in our overall well-being. "Our vision, for real, is to have everyone live longer, happier, healthier lives," Allen said. "You see that in the tagline for almost everything, but it's true."

Allen believed in the Blue Zones Project so much that NCH is funding the eight-year project for Southwest Florida.

"We have over 200 organizations that are Blue Zone-certified, ranging from elementary schools ... gated communities and religious communities. All of those activities are part of [it]."

But he vows NCH will not to stop. "The whole idea is to have this perpetuate. We're not going to quit, and have everybody go back to smoking," he said.

And should you ever need NCH services, you can rest assured that your care is the staff's top priority — and that dedication shows. In December 2017, NCH was awarded a 5-star rating for safety and quality from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Some 57 quality measures were used to determine how well a hospital performs in these seven measures: mortality; safety of care; readmission; patient experience; effectiveness of care; timeliness of care; and efficient use of medical imaging. No other hospital in Southwest Florida received 5 stars.

The CEO also vows to continue on as head of NCH. And, at nearly 71 years old, Allen Weiss doesn't show any signs of slowing down. Most days, he wakes around 4 a.m. and does 100 situps, 20 pushups and light stretching before taking a swim or a spin class followed by some weightlifting.

"I want to do age-specific exercises ... over the years, I was a big-time runner, but you age out of that after a while," said Allen.

When asked if he's ready to retire, Allen readily replies: "My facetious answer is that I'm going to retire when my suits wear out." Because a suit has an average lifespan of 10 years, Allen Weiss is likely to continue on for the foreseeable future. "I just bought a new suit!" 🍷

Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida was spearheaded by Dr. Allen Weiss of NCH Healthcare Systems, standing center of the crowd, as Big Cypress Elementary School becomes one of Blue Zones Project Approved schools in the district.

CREDIT: BLUE ZONES PROJECT SOUTHWEST FLORIDA



## Acronyms explained

Next to Allen Weiss' name are these acronyms: MBA, MD, FACP and FACR. All give clues to his background.

### MBA

Masters in Business Administration. Allen Weiss was once the oldest graduate of Florida Gulf Coast University, age 53 at the time, where he earned his MBA and was subsequently named Distinguished Alumnus.

### MD

Allen Weiss earned his Doctor of Medicine from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. But his parents were nervous he might flunk out of the Ivy League university, having only average academic experiences previously.

### FACP

Fellow of the American College of Physicians. As a resident at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, Allen Weiss recalled caring for famous patients at the flagship hospital, including United Nations leaders, TV reporters and others.

### FACR

Fellow of the American College of Rheumatology. As a new rheumatologist in Naples, Allen Weiss' first patient was Herb Sugden, the local philanthropist. "I took one look at him and I knew exactly what to do. Fortunately, he got better," said Allen Weiss of Sugden's rheumatoid arthritis.