

Louie B. Felt was beginning of hospital with May Anderson

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Primary Children's hospital is a rare gem

By Lee Benson

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It is commonly said that Primary Children's Medical Center never turns away a sick child.

But that is technically not true.

It's actually the community that supports Primary Children's Medical Center that never turns away a sick child.

For 80 years now, it has sat in the hills above Salt Lake City, first in a home where the LDS Conference Center now stands, then on the west Avenues — and since 1990 on the University of Utah campus next to the University Medical Center. It is the one place in the valley where only minors are allowed. If you're under 21 and you're sick, they let you in. No questions asked. If parents or guardians — or insurance companies — can't pay the high price of medicine, you're still in, with no reduction in care.

Hospitals like this are rare. There are only 45 free-standing children's hospitals in the entire country, and not all of them open the doors to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.

But this one does. Because charity is its foundation. Take that away and it would have nothing to stand on.

As the story goes, the hospital had its beginnings one day early in the 1900s when a woman named Louie B. Felt and her friend, May Anderson, happened to observe a polio-stricken child walking with a crutch in a Salt Lake park. The women took to worrying about the child. They decided children should have their own place for medical attention.

These women were not without clout. Louie Felt was president of the LDS Church's Primary organization — a children's growth auxiliary — and May Anderson was her aide. They soon had an appointment with the president of the LDS Church. By the time they walked out of his office, they had the go-ahead to start a crippled children's ward, with its beds open to all.

For over half-a-century, donations generated through the LDS Church's local Primaries funded the charitable giving of the Primary Children's Hospital. By the time the church divested itself of the hospital in 1975, so many people were in the habit of giving that they couldn't stop.

People who remember once giving pennies for their age or height as children now give pennies for their weight or golf score. Others give because they have seen a friend or a neighbor, or maybe a son or daughter, benefit from the hospital. Others give because of the sheer momentum of goodness.

What the Primary got started, the community has kept alive.

In what has become an ongoing Miracle on the East Bench, literally millions of dollars pour in every year — and as Marilee Salvesen of the Primary Children's Foundation puts it, these millions tend to pour in "about ten dollars at a time."

Last year, "Pennies By The Inch" — one of four annual fund-raisers the foundation conducts — raised \$1.3 million alone. That money, along with proceeds from a radiothon in February, a telethon in June and the Festival of Trees in December, helped fund nearly \$6.6 million in outright charitable care.

This year's Pennies By The Inch campaign is currently under way — from Sept. 15 through Oct. 15 — and as far as Marilee can tell, the legacy is alive and well.

Each day, from her office desk on the medical center's fourth floor, she can see the volunteer counters open envelopes filled with charity.

And yes, some of it still arrives in penny form.

Some traditions are just too good to die.