Staff and families bid farewell to hospice's chief executive as new leader steps into the role

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Francis House Children's Hospice has said a fond farewell to its Chief Executive Officer Revd David Ireland and also welcomed Rachael Taylor as his replacement.

David spent twenty years at the helm of the hospice, having swapped a career as an architect to take over the running of Francis House in 2005. He oversaw the conversion of a former convent in Didsbury into Francis House Children's Hospice, which opened in 1991. David joined the board of trustees in July 1994 and was offered the job of chief executive following the retirement of Sister Aloysius, the founder of the hospice.

Sharon Doodson, the Registered Manager and Director of Care at Francis House, said: "David's vision, dedication, and unwavering commitment have shaped our hospice into the well-established, compassionate service it is today. From his early days on the Board of Trustees in 1994 to leading as CEO for the past 20 years, his passion for supporting children, young people and their families has never wavered.

"Beyond his leadership, David has been a source of comfort and support, not just as a CEO but as a chaplain who knows every family by name. His presence will be deeply missed by staff and families. While we will feel the impact of his absence, we are incredibly grateful for his lasting legacy. We wish him well in his retirement and hope he can now take the time to relax, knowing he has built something truly remarkable."

As an architect, David played a pivotal role in building the hospice, growing the service to meet the needs of young people aged over 13 years by introducing Francis Lodge, developing two residential units for young people who can no longer be cared for at home, and establishing a psychotherapy unit to provide essential emotional and psychological support.

"Francis House has been a huge part of my life from its very inception," said David. "One thing that we offer to families is stability. It has been the greatest privilege to have been able to follow in the footsteps of Sister Aloysius, the founder of the hospice. People from across the North West are really supportive of Francis House through their love and concern for the families. I can leave it in a good state for Rachael, our next Chief Executive, to move things on and continue to expand and develop the service to meet the increasing need. Francis House will be well looked after into the future under Rachael's guidance.

"I would like to thank all the staff and volunteers for your friendship, support and for doing a great job. But the biggest thanks has to go to the children, young people and their families, who have allowed us to walk alongside them in good and difficult times; the mums and dads who have trusted us to care for their children and allowed us to help them make wonderful memories."

All the staff and volunteers at the hospice wished David a well-deserved, fulfilling, relaxing and happy retirement.

They also gave a warm welcome to Rachael Taylor, who takes over as the new CEO at the beginning of April. Rachael is only the third Chief Executive Officer to be appointed in the 33 years of the existence of the hospice.

Rachael said: "Many leaders leave their mark on an organisation, but few can say they have built theirs. As an architect, David did not just design a building; he created a home from home at Francis House – a place of comfort care and support for children and families during life's most challenging moments.

"David's influence has reached far beyond the walls of Francis House through his work with hospices in Yokohama, Bosnia Herzegovina and The Czech Republic. He has shared his experience and given guidance on a global scale to other hospices, spreading the word about good palliative care for children and teenagers. I shall miss his unwavering support, and on behalf of everyone at Francis House, we wish him a happy retirement and thank him for everything that he has achieved."

Jane Kempler, chair of the Board of Trustees, thanked David for his exceptional dedication, hard work and total commitment to Francis House and the families it supports.

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“David has built an environment to give the very best to the children, young adults and their families at the times when they need it the most,” said Jane. “He will be greatly missed by those families and of course, the Francis House family too. He is leaving an amazing legacy and a strong platform for Rachael to take into Francis House's new chapter. The Trustees are very much looking forward to supporting Rachael build on the solid foundations left by David into an exciting new era.”

Francis House trustee and High Sheriff of Greater Manchester, Eamonn O’Neal OBE, presented David with a High Sheriff Special Recognition Award for Unrivalled Dedicated Service.

Eamonn said: “David is a fine example of how contributing to a compassionate society through dedicated service can make a huge difference to those who need support at the most difficult times. His Francis House journey literally started at the drawing board and finished up in the CEO’s office. That will never be repeated. What we do know, however, is that Rachael will build upon David’s legacy and lead the hospice into the future with vigour, energy and innovation, so we’re in good hands.”

Francis House supports the families of children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions through a range of services including respite care, homecare, day care, sibling support, parental support, end of life care, emotional and bereavement support. It costs £4.8 million per year to run Francis House with the majority of income through voluntary giving.

The history of Francis House is available to read in a fascinating new book ‘A Worthwhile Error – The History of Francis House Children’s Hospice’ with all proceeds from the book going towards the care of the children and families. Visit www.francishouse.org.uk/online-shop

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