

# a day in the life of...

BY LAURA LADD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY SCARLATI

## Lee Medical<sup>®</sup>, Inc. strives to deliver quality care with compassion

**A**s health care providers and patients alike struggle to navigate a complex system of reimbursement, regulatory issues and access to care, a home grown health care company has found success in the personal touch.

Lee Medical<sup>®</sup> Inc., headquartered in Franklin and run by husband-and-wife team Michele and Chuck Lee, provides vascular access therapy – the placement of a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC) line – to patients in hospital, home health, long term care and other settings. What makes Lee Medical unique is not just the delivery of this highly specialized service, but something much greater: hope, healing, compassion and support to people in a time of need.

Michele, a registered nurse, developed a proficiency and passion for in IV therapy during her career at St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis. Chuck, a successful music businessman and composer, contributed the necessary business acumen and analytical skills to the partnership.

### SETTING THEMSELVES APART

One of the most unpleasant aspects of treatment for patients with chronic illnesses is multiple needle sticks for the drawing of blood or administration of needed medications. A PICC provides access for delivering medication on an ongoing basis, eliminating the need for additional needle sticks. Lee Medical has a remarkable 99 percent success rate for PICC placement and an infection rate of less than 0.5 percent per 1,000 catheter days, which far exceeds industry averages. The company serves a broad variety of patients and diagnoses: cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, HIV, tuberculosis, cardiac diseases and infections of all kinds.

In 1993, Michele discovered a need for expertise in vascular access – a new technology at the time – and became a consultant and trainer for manufacturers, nurses, physicians and hospitals across the United States.

“What began by never saying ‘no’ to a patient in need grew quickly from a sole proprietorship to a business,” she says. “One request for help became a contract with a physician, then with a hospital and eventually, entire hospital systems.”

The concept became a company in an unintentional way, driven by Michele's desire to help patients in need.

“On average, I worked 17-hour days and drove about 300 miles a day,” she says with a smile. “The one thing that kept me going was the need. I would enter a patient's room at the end of a 20-hour work day, look into the eyes of a frightened, sick human being and receive an incredible burst of energy and compassion. The opportunity to



serve someone in their darkest hour is humbling.”

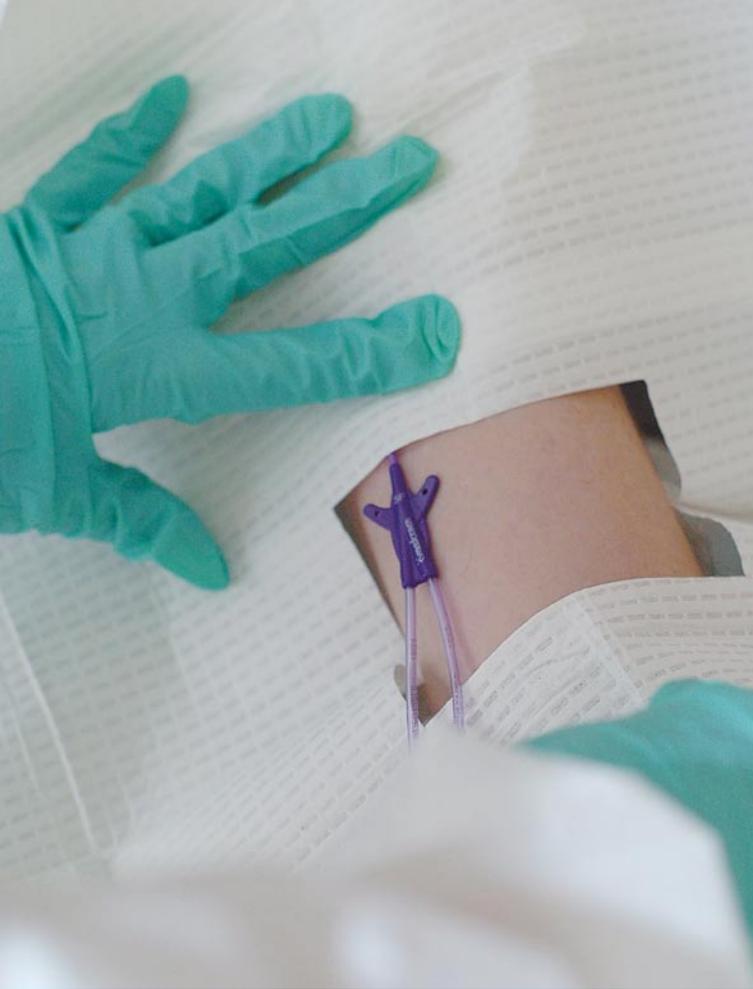
As the demand for Michele's unique approach began to grow, Chuck set aside his music career at a high point – having received the career-making BMI Jerry Goldsmith Film Scoring Scholarship – to help Michele. Chuck created a business plan and operating structure and a patented electronic medical records program, VAST™ (vascular access surveillance and tracking), which tracks patient-specific, historical data.

“Chuck was able to focus my compassion and put systems in place so that we could replicate the model and touch more lives,” Michele explains.

### SERVICE WITH COMPASSION AND PURPOSE

Today, the Lees employ certified registered nurse intravenous (CRNI) specialists and serve clients across the state. Industry requirements mandate that nurses complete three PICC insertions to be deemed clinically competent. However, Lee Medical nurses must perform the procedure 250 times during initial orientation.

“This training period gives us time to educate nurses about our mission,” Michele explains. “At first, we hired nurses primarily for their technical skills. Now we focus on hiring the right ‘heart,’ and build expertise through rigorous training. We must be sensitive conduits of help and healing. I firmly believe that ability is the very



core of nursing.”

“Chuck and Michele are professional and compassionate, offering calmness and healing in very stressful situations,” says Donna Huff, former patient and Lee Medical board member. “They are truly servants in our medical community, and health care at its best.”

Part of the Lees’ mission is caring for their caregivers, as well. The company’s niche allows nurses to focus on doing one thing well, and rediscover the reasons they chose health care as a profession.

“Nurses in traditional health care environments have an overwhelming group of responsibilities,” Michele says. “Our culture is very empowering for our nurses, as well as the other health care professionals we support. We help them get back to the business of caring for people.”

#### WHAT MATTERS MOST

For the Lees, it’s a personal business. Patient success stories are remembered in precise detail, with proud smiles and occasional tears: 14-month-old baby Grant, who was treated for severe ear infections, enabling him to return home to his parents for his first Christmas; a seven-year lung transplant survivor who has become a family friend; or an 80-year-old inmate with a brain tumor.

Success has come from putting the patient first and the balance sheet second. This might range from communicating a patient’s phobia of needles to a new physician, to making sure the pets of a hospitalized patient are fed.

“You always have to do the right thing, and have faith that in time the numbers will take care of themselves,” Chuck says. “That’s not to say you can’t adhere to the basics of good business practices. At times, you have to have the courage to set business demands aside and meet the need. We have to get back to a place where caregivers are free to be driven by the patient’s needs. It takes creative thinking, courage and a great deal of faith.”

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