



# Banner Mesa Hospital closes as Gateway opens

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A chapter in Mesa history came to an end Tuesday with a mixture of sadness and excitement when Banner Mesa Medical Center closed permanently with little fanfare after 44 years of serving the city.

"We love you Mesa Lutheran," read a hand-written sign on a fence, referring to the nine-story west Mesa landmark's name for its first 40 years. The name changed when Banner acquired the facility through a merger of two hospital chains in 2000.

Banner facilities crews covered the signs on the building Tuesday as a trickle of employees returned to pick up their belongings. One woman who drove up to the closed emergency room was given a map to Banner Desert Medical Center, about a six-mile drive.

Lori Fort of east Mesa, the first child born at Mesa Lutheran, on May 14, 1963, was sad to hear it had closed. Jayme Heller, 31, of Gilbert said she was glad to make history Monday as the last mother to give birth at the hospital, welcoming her first child, Ashlyn Kobee Heller.

"It makes me sad. It's part of who I am," Fort said. "When I tell people I was the first person born at Mesa Lutheran, they say, 'You're kidding.' "

Although she lives near the new Banner Gateway Medical Center in Gilbert, which also opened Tuesday at Higley Road and U.S. 60, Fort said she doesn't know what hospital she would use in the future or whether she can ever recapture her sense of belonging at Banner Mesa Medical Center.

"You think things will last forever. How could anything happen to a hospital? It's sad," Fort said. "We're just a disposable society now. When you can dispose of a hospital and build a new one, there's something terribly wrong."

But Banner Health said Banner Mesa had become antiquated and it would cost more to retrofit it for high-tech electronics than to build a new hospital. No decision has been reached on Banner Mesa's future. Banner Health is considering a plan to convert it into an office building.

"We're optimistic they will find a good re-use for the facility," said Tanya Collins, co-chairwoman of the Mesa Grande Community Alliance, a coalition of west Mesa groups. "We're hoping they will do it in a timely way and it doesn't just sit there for a long time."

The buildings at Country Club Drive and Brown Road won't be abandoned, with more than 100 Banner employees remaining for non-patient services.

"It's kind of an end of an era for the hospital for sure," said Jordan Heller, also 31, who stood at his wife's side and witnessed the birth of the couple's first child.

Jayme Heller said Sept. 25 was her due date. "We were aiming for the new hospital, but we didn't have a choice. Maybe we made a little history," she said.

With so few patients left in the hospital Monday, "I think the whole staff was in on her birth. They were kind of sad," Jayme Heller

said.

Brian Ebert, 24, became one of the last patients treated at the emergency room Monday afternoon when he accidentally stabbed himself and needed stitches. "This is awesome. I'm so happy to be involved in the farewell. I'm sorry I couldn't bring a better wound," he quipped. "They've done a really great job every time I've come in."

Debbie Fields, 48, of Mesa, came to the hospital one last time Monday afternoon.

"It's been around a long time. It's been a hospital we've depended upon," Fields said. "We'll be sad to see it go."

Like many employees, the experience of closing one hospital and opening a new one is bittersweet for emergency room nurse Aaron Seaman.

"It's mixed emotions. I live right close by here. It will leave a void," he said. "But it's going to be new equipment, new tools. It's very exciting."