

# At hospital, volunteers give, get TLC

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Judy Meichelbeck of Grafton, a former social worker, initially wanted to work in the maternity ward as a so-called "rocking grandmother." But after hearing about her years spent working with people in need, [Elaine Willey] matched her up with the oncology unit, where she performs clerical work and also sits and talks to patients during their visits for chemotherapy treatments.

Not everything the volunteers do is this intense. Barbara Rapisarda, a retired medical assistant who has been volunteering at Milford Regional for three years, often finds herself pressed into service as an emergency baby sitter while mothers or fathers are cared for, and says she appreciates the sense of humor employed by hospital staff when dealing with critical and not-so-critical matters.

## FULL TEXT

GLOBE WEST 3 / MILFORD

Milford Regional Medical Center's volunteer room buzzed with activity on a recent afternoon.

At around 2 p.m., a half-dozen or so senior citizens stuffed hundreds of mammogram reminder cards into envelopes for mailing; an hour later, an equal number of teenagers set to work preparing packages of IV supplies for the emergency department.

In another setting, this might be considered grunt work, but here, the laughter and smiles might lead a visitor to think it was some kind of party.

"It's a lot of fun," said Sophie Abimerhi, a Nipmuc Regional High School sophomore. "You make a lot of friends going around the hospital. And the people who work here are really friendly."

The hospital's 150 or so volunteers help address one of the most common patient complaints at any hospital: the long waits for anything to happen. The waiting is partially eased with drinks, snacks, and magazines from the hospitality cart, which the volunteers keep in near-constant motion throughout the day.

The delays are also shrunk by the 100 to 200 errands performed each day by volunteers, who carry paperwork, medication, and supplies from one department to another, freeing up the professionals.

"It's a support for both the patients and the staff," said Elaine Willey, the hospital's director of volunteer services. "A lot of these roles are to keep the flow going so that patients can get their care quicker."

While they help keep the hospital running, volunteers said they also get a lot of satisfaction out of the work.

The volunteer room is the nerve center. Until the teenagers arrive after school is out, it's the domain of an energetic crew of senior citizens who swap jokes and stories while performing clerical work and waiting to be called for errands. Most said they began volunteering to stay busy during retirement. Some also wanted to give something back to the hospital after being helped through trying times.

Portia Tang started volunteering after being impressed by the hospital's care for her husband, and for her, while he was dying from cancer. Irma and Joe Murzycki joined up after the hospital staff performed a lifesaving operation on Joe a few years back.

"This is a reward for us to be able to give our time to the hospital," said Irma.

"My pay is walking out of here on your own two feet," said Joe. "It's well worth it."

Only a few of the volunteers have experience in healthcare: Tang worked for a printing company in her native Hong Kong, Irma Murzycki worked in accounting, and her husband was a textile dyer and elementary school custodian.

When someone does show up with a related professional background, they are matched up with a unit where their skills can be put to best use.

Judy Meichelbeck of Grafton, a former social worker, initially wanted to work in the maternity ward as a so-called "rocking grandmother." But after hearing about her years spent working with people in need, Willey matched her up with the oncology unit, where she performs clerical work and also sits and talks to patients during their visits for chemotherapy treatments.

Now, Meichelbeck says, she wouldn't trade the role she has for the one she originally wanted.

"I have had my eyes opened like I can't believe," she said. "These people who come in for these treatments, they are so courageous, and they're so philosophical. It seems like they all end up with a philosophy of how they're going to deal with it, how they're going to die with it, how they're going to handle it with their families."

Not everything the volunteers do is this intense. Barbara Rapisarda, a retired medical assistant who has been volunteering at Milford Regional for three years, often finds herself pressed into service as an emergency baby sitter while mothers or fathers are cared for, and says she appreciates the sense of humor employed by hospital staff when dealing with critical and not-so-critical matters.

She recalled the gentle needling she got from hospital staff when she fell at home and came in for treatment of a minor injury.

"I was very happy with the way they treated me, other than the teasing," she said, laughing: "What are you doing here? You knew better than to come here!"

The teen volunteers all said that learning how to communicate with people other than peers, parents, and teachers is a lesson they will take with them, whether they are interested in going into healthcare or not.

Hopedale High senior Kaitlin Keating plans to use what she has learned in a career in international relations, while Abimerhi, the Nipmuc Regional sophomore, said the people skills she is learning will be useful in reaching her goal of becoming a lawyer.

Paul Zeller, a sophomore at Mount St. Charles Academy, said he was considering a career in pharmacy.

Zeller has learned a lesson: that parents can sometimes be right. "At first, my mom was kind of pushing me" toward volunteering at the hospital. "But as I did it more, I liked it better," he said.

Nicole Mussouli, a freshman at Uxbridge High who is thinking about going into nursing, is even more certain about her future after just a month as a volunteer.

"It does make me want to do it more," said Mussouli. "Just the feeling of helping people. It feels good."

That, according to one of the retirees, applies to both the young and not so young.

"I would suggest this to anybody," said Anna Nardi of Mendon, who started volunteering at the urging of a daughter who is a nurse. Many "people feel as though maybe just the old people do it, but there's a lot of young people. You might see old people here, but they're young at heart."

To volunteer at Milford Regional, call 508-422-2263 or e-mail ewilley@milreg.org. Volunteers must make a six-month commitment and will be given a health screening as part of the placement process.

Credit: Will Kilburn Globe Correspondent. PHOTOS BY BILL POLO/GLOBE STAFF

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