

Patients celebrate the holidays in a place they call home

By Lee Strong

For many people, the thought of spending Christmas in a hospital is at best depressing. The idea of spending the holidays in an institution like Monroe Community Hospital, where one must live year round, to some, might seem intolerable.

"Those are the ones on the outside who think that," Elmer DeBuck declared. "This isn't a hospital; it's a community."

The celebration of Christmas at the Monroe Community Hospital offers an example of the community spirit that residents and staff have attempted to create in the long-term care facility.

The neighborhood association — the patient's governing body — and the hospital's Therapeutic Recreation Department have worked together to make Christmas a special time of the year for the patients, according to Edward Oleksiak, the recreation department's director. Each unit has a hospital-sponsored Christmas party. At the party, personalized gifts are given to each patient — years ago the procedure was to give gifts marked simply "gift/man" or "gift/woman". In addition, many of the units have their own private parties.

As part of the ongoing Christmas celebrations this year, the patient choir performed several concerts, and various outside groups — such as the "Hum-Dingers" of the Henrietta Senior Citizens Group — entertained patients at some of the parties. For Christmas Day, the Dietary Committee has planned a special dinner.

In addition, the hospital parish community celebrated a Christmas Mass with Bishop Joseph L. Hogan December 20. This Christmas, the parish council donated money to such social-service agencies as St. Joseph's House of Hospitality and Bethany House.

"People think we're the poor, sick people in the hospital," Fran DeJarlar, a member of the parish council, said. "We want to show that handicaps are just like everyone else."

DeBuck, an 18-year-old resident of the hospital, credits the patients' neighborhood association — of which he is currently president — as being one of the primary causes of the community spirit in the hospital. He also cited it as one of the forces responsible for fostering a sense of pride in the patients and for improving hospital conditions for them.

The association was created in the late 1970s to give the patients a greater voice in the hospital's operation. Over the years, the group has recommended numerous improvements. Simple alterations like renaming the floors Friendship 3 or Hope 2 instead of the more impersonal F-3 or H-2, or having lower buttons installed in elevators for people in wheelchairs have made the hospital a more pleasant place to live, DeBuck said.

DeBuck is especially proud of one of the association's achievements: obtaining the right to vote for patients.

"We had to get (the government) to recognize that this is our home so we could use the hospital as our home addresses when we reg-



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal

During one of many Christmas celebrations at Monroe Community Hospital, patient Jenny DiCaccia (right) greets Santa Claus, portrayed by Mike Walsh, a therapeutic recreation specialist at the hospital.

istered (to vote)," DeBuck explained. "What we did here became a model for other nursing homes."

The neighborhood association continues to serve as a patient forum and service group. At Christmas, the association provides financial assistance through a transportation fund to patients visiting relatives. The group — working in conjunction with hospital security — has also created a neighborhood watch. The dietary committee works with the hospital's dietary department to improve meals.

All of these activities, DeBuck explained, have helped to make the hospital a better place to live. "It's just like an outside community," he noted. "We work together to make this our home."

The neighborhood association works in conjunction with the hospital parish. Daily Mass is celebrated in different units, "to give more people a chance to get to Mass," DeJarlar noted. This has encouraged more people to become involved in the parish community, she added.

A second factor that has helped to make the hospital a community was the formation of the recreation department in 1975. According to Emily Hawley, the hospital's assistant administrator for patient services, the department was

created as a result of a nationwide change in emphasis in extended-care facilities. "There was not just an emphasis on good care, but also on restorative care — care that would help (patients) to do everything they could," Hawley noted.

The department developed "a number of goal-oriented individual activities to help people to improve if they could," Hawley said. These activities include ceramics and cooking classes; arts, and crafts, music programs and a resident choir.

The department also began supporting patients' rights. "There was a time when we had to advocate for people to decorate their rooms," Oleksiak recalled. "Now it's one of the things we encourage people to do to make their rooms more personal to them."

Hawley praised the neighborhood association and the recreation department for their efforts to create a sense of community in the hospital. She also expressed gratitude for all the volunteers and groups who have helped to make Christmas joyful.

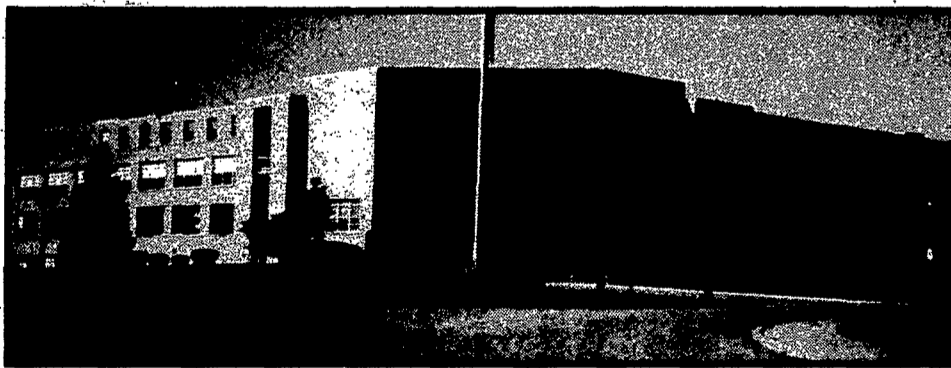
"This is not a sad or lonely place," she said. "People in the (outside) community don't always understand that this is a place that can be joyous at Christmas and throughout the year."



Lambert Jacobsmeier was among a group of senior citizens from Henrietta who entertained Monroe Community Hospital patients with skits and kazoo music.

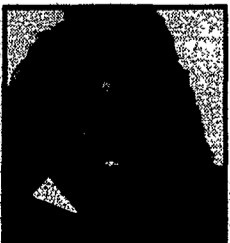
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