

Christmas FEATURE

'Another day' for nursing home on Christmas

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

Partying, caroling, visiting with Santa, gift exchanging, and going to Mass. Most Yuletide festivities still go on after a person moves into a nursing home.

The most caring institution, however, can't assure one tradition: Spending Christmas with family.

The ideal Christmas should be spent "with family," said Elmer De Buck, a Monroe Community Hospital resident for 26 years and its residents council president.

De Buck, who will turn 72 on Dec. 30, understands his two nephews will be running here and there on Christmas. And he does get visits on Christmas Eve. It is other residents who concern him.

"They have family, but they don't come like a lot of families do," he said. So he plans to go visiting other residents after 11 a.m. Mass in the auditorium and dinner, between television specials he'll watch with friends in his room.

Some people just can't stand to come and see loved ones bedridden or disabled, he said. Others, including one of his own relatives, just can't stand to walk into a hospital or nursing home.

"I don't know why," he shrugged, "as long as you come in and go back out."

Christmas is just "another day" to many nursing home residents and staff, said Father Winfried Kellner, MCH Catholic chaplain, and Beverly Smith, a nursing assistant.

"It's there — a sadness," Father Kellner said. "Moreso than usual because they can't be with family."

"We tell them Merry Christmas. We always orient them to a holiday," Smith said of the more severely mentally impaired residents. "But we don't have time to get involved. We do the care and dietary has to do the meals. We're working short-staffed (on Christmas) anyway, so there's more patient care. By the time you finish with their morning care, you're into lunch and you start all over again."

At least De Buck, and maybe a few others, will be making rounds, thanks to his electric wheelchair and hands that can work it despite near paralysis from long-standing rheumatoid arthritis, and fused joints from ankylosis of the spine.

He'll sit and hold a neighbor's hand, even if the neighbor can't respond. "They know what your meaning is," he said.

And for those who can communicate, he said, "We'll talk about anything we know to try to keep our mind off it. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it doesn't."

As for himself, he said, "Around Thanksgiving I still think how much I miss my dad. But Christmas was the worst day till lately, when I started to put it out of my mind. You can put it out of your mind, but you can't put it out of your heart. Your Christmases aren't the same."



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

The Monroe Community Hospital Choir performs for a packed hospital auditorium Dec. 14. The choir, which sings and plays tone chimes, presents concerts in the community as well as at MCH, where its members are long-term care residents. Directing is Donna Birrittella, a licensed music therapist.

De Buck, whose mother died when he was 4 months old, worked on his father's Irondequoit vegetable farm. He worshiped with his brother and his father at Our Lady of Victory Church. "We used to always go to Christmas Eve Mass when I was home," he said. His father, from Belgium, could speak his native language with parishioners there.

The altars were high, DeBuck recalled, and of the two smaller altars one was "like a big cave" and was made into a nativity scene. After Mass the three would go home, sit around and talk a while, and then open presents in the wee hours.

One was a steam shovel for his brother, and another was a dump truck for him. "It was made out of pure metal — you could stand on it and it wouldn't break."

Today he still enjoys tending plants — huge healthy ferns in the dining area, and assorted plants in his room — and giving. The Neighborhood Association he heads donated \$1,000 from plant sales toward transportation for residents going home for Christmas. (The nursing director roughly estimates 20 percent of the 560 long-term-care residents will visit

relatives.) The MCH auxiliary and T. Franklin Williams foundation also raised money for the specialized transports, which cost about \$70 round-trip within the city.

De Buck is also pleased that his parish council at MCH, headed by Frances Dejarlar, donated \$150 to each of nine ministries this Christmas: area soup kitchens, shelters, hospitality houses, and Covenant House in New York.

"We haven't got much here, but a lot of people on the outside have got less," De Buck said.

Christmas Mass will be his own holiday highlight. He said, "I would rather go to Mass than open presents. I don't know how other people feel, but it makes my spirit lift right up. I figure the good Lord has done so much for us, why can't we give him one day out of the year for himself, and go visit people who can't get out, and talk to them and try to make them feel better. Just because you're here, the good Lord hasn't forgotten you."

Around Christmas, he said, "I sit down and think I'm pretty lucky. A lot of people have a lot more problems than I did."

THE MONTHLY PRAYER REQUEST FOR PRIESTS Prayer for Vocations

Lord our God, in your great love you have called us from nothingness into being. Through Jesus Christ your Child, who is the way, the truth and the life, you have called us to walk on the road of perfection, and to consecrate ourselves to you and to the service of all people, whom you have created for life and glory.

To those who are called to a life of faith in the midst of the world, give the grace of witness to the Gospel.

To those who are called to the life of Christian perfection, give the grace of contemplation, understanding of the will of God, and zeal for his righteousness and charity.

To those who are called to service in the ordained ministries, give the grace of your Holy Spirit to nourish and strengthen their brothers and sisters in the way of the Lord.

Indeed, grant to all of us the gifts of witness, of perfection, and of service.

Give us the power to carry the cross of discipleship, the peace to discern our true calling, and the gift of communion with you through prayer and love.

Lord, we can do nothing without the grace of your Holy Spirit, uphold those who have been sealed with the gift of your Spirit, and pour forth an abundance of gifts for the building up of your Kingdom. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Master of the harvest, send laborers to your Church to gather the harvest of faith, for you are the Giver of Life, and we give glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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