

## FEATURE

# Volunteer group provides hope for heart patients

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

In moments of fear and uncertainty, the best support usually comes from those who can fully relate to your struggle.

This concept forms the basic principle of Mended Hearts, Inc. The national group comprises approximately 4,000 volunteers in 157 chapters who assist recovering heart patients.

Most of the volunteers are survivors of some form of heart surgery or disease, according to Joanné Evans, a member of Mended Hearts Chapter 50 (Rochester area).

"Knowing God has given us a second chance, we'd like to support others," Evans said.

Volunteers visit with people who are contemplating heart surgery, or who have recently gone through it. Two such Chapter 50 members are Cliff and Hazel Squire, who make 10 to 15 visits per month at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital.

On a recent Friday-afternoon trip to Strong, the Squires stopped to see Donald Gramlich, who had undergone double-bypass surgery three days earlier. Cliff Squire explained to Gramlich that he, too, had endured bypass surgery in 1991. The Squires then gave Gramlich a brochure containing information about the local Mended Hearts chapter, and asked if there were any other questions he had.

"It's good to know there are people out there who care," Gramlich told the Squires as their 15-minute visit neared its conclusion.

The Squires are among 42 volunteers affiliated with Chapter 50. The group makes regular stops at three hospitals: Strong Memorial; Rochester General Hospital; and Highland Hospital. Mended Hearts volunteers are carefully trained to answer questions and give moral support to the patients and their families.

In addition to hospital visits, Mended Hearts members keep in touch with patients after they have returned home through follow-up phone calls and visits.



Cliff and Hazel Squire, members of the Mended Hearts, Inc., offer moral support to heart patient Donald Gramlich during a visit to Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Many people affiliated with Chapter 50 also attend Mended Hearts meetings at the Jewish Community Center, 1200 Edgewood Ave., Brighton. Held on the third Monday of each month at 7 p.m., the meetings consist of information sessions and lectures by heart-disease experts.

Charlie Bell, who survived a massive heart attack 15 years ago, said he became involved with Mended Hearts in 1992 when he began attending the monthly sessions.

"I learned more in a few meetings

than I did in all my time with my doctor, because of the speakers," said Bell, 60, a parishioner at Holy Trinity Church in Webster. He explained that the guest lecturers patiently answered any questions he had.

Less than a year later, Bell realized that the Mended Hearts support system can extend well beyond issues connected with heart disease. He recalled that Chapter 50 members kept in close touch with him after his son died.

"If people are that caring and that loving, then I'm going to be a part of them,"

Bell remarked. He is currently a Chapter 50 board member and fundraiser.

Cliff Squire added that he was similarly moved when, after his bypass surgery, he received a visit from a Mended Hearts member.

"I was kind of impressed. Here was a man who had had his surgery a few years back and he seemed to be in good health and leading a normal life. At that point I was wondering how I was going to be, and he was very encouraging to me," recalled Squire, 69, who made a full recovery.

Evans facilitates training of Chapter 50 volunteers. She noted that the group strives to let patients know that "there is life after heart surgery. We're living proof of that."

Evans, who said she is in her 50s, underwent open-heart surgery in the early 1980s. She later helped establish a Mended Hearts chapter in Colorado, and became involved with Chapter 50 in 1984 after moving to the Rochester area.

Bell noted that the Mended Hearts motto is "It's great to be alive — and to help others."

"It's a combination of educational support and love," Bell concluded. "There is somebody there to love you."

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EDITORS' NOTE: For more information on Mended Hearts, Inc., call 716/234-1538.

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