

When you're designing a new hospital from the ground up, you have the ability to make room in the floor plan and the budget for what is most important. When Smilow Cancer Hospital first opened, it launched with two volunteer coordinators on staff to manage and grow the remarkable volunteer program that is a vital component of patient care.

And grow it has. In 2017, volunteers at Smilow Cancer Hospital and its Care Centers logged a grand total of 25,893 hours. Volunteers of all ages, backgrounds, and skills dedicate their time, effort, and energy in service to Smilow's patients and staff.

"We have an incredibly talented staff at Smilow who are unsurpassed in terms of clinical medical care," said Lynelle Abel, Director, Volunteer and Guest Services at Yale New Haven Hospital. "What makes the margin of difference is what our volunteers bring to the experience for our patients."

MUSIC TO THEIR EARS

The lobby is where most patients and their families form their first impression of Smilow. It's there you will find Tom Ciancia behind the Yamaha grand piano every Monday afternoon, providing a soothing soundtrack for an experience he understands all too well.

"Both my mother and sister died of cancer," he said. "I remember what it was like going with them to the hospital and how emotional it was." After he retired as a benefits administrator and made his lifelong passion for piano his second career, he sought out the opportunity to share his time and talent through Smilow's volunteer program.

The healing power of music reaches Smilow patients through a number of volunteer efforts. Carolers deck the halls with song during the holidays. The Song Circle for Healing brings together patients, staff, volunteers, and family members twice a month to sing and play music together in the resource center. Performers serenade patients at their bedside as well as at birthday parties and other special events. But the lobby pianists are the anchor, accounting for nearly 70 percent of the hours donated through the music program in 2017.

Mr. Ciancia always takes a read of the room before launching his weekly performance. If the lunchtime crowd is younger, he might include a recent hit like Sam Smith's "Stay with Me." He's well versed in the big-band hits of the '40s and crooners of the '50s for older visitors. His playlist runs deepest in hits of the '70s, '80s, and early '90s. "I like to play soft, soothing music to make it relaxing for people," he explained. "I try to put in some uplifting songs, too, but in a mellow style."

His playing has struck a chord with his audience, which is an ever-changing mix of patients, families, physicians, staff, and volunteers. "It is very rewarding when someone comes up and says it sounds great, or writes me a note," he said. "I always joke that I am the last person you would want in a medical crisis, but I can play the piano for a good cause."

Smilow's vast **volunteer program** touches every element of the patient experience

Service Calls

Kristin Rattini writer Peter Baker photographer





SERVICE WITH A SMILE

There was no doubt where Mr. Ciancia’s talents could be best used at Smilow. However, not all volunteers have as clear of a vision; they just know that they want to make a difference. Ms. Abel helps bring that vision into focus during the screening process.

“All the volunteers are required to go through a similar onboarding process that our employees do,” she said. “They are interviewed. They have a background check, reference check, and health screening. We take it very seriously and screen carefully before we allow a volunteer into any part of the hospital. We discover in that process where their skill set may be best suited. We have around 60 volunteer positions. Not all volunteers want to work directly with patients. Some prefer behind-the-scenes work, such as a clerical position. We try to make a match depending on the volunteer’s comfort level, communication skills, and previous experience.”

May-May Cheng knew she wanted to volunteer with cancer patients but wasn’t sure in which capacity. “I’ve had experience as a caregiver three times in my life for people close to me who had cancer,” she said.

After her screening, Ms. Cheng was assigned to the customer services program. These volunteers are among the most visible and widespread in the hospital. Easily identifiable in their red jackets and red polo shirts, they provide a reassuring, positive presence, as well as meals, supplies, information, and other support in key locations. Ambassadors are a mainstay of the customer service

program; they greet all patients and visitors as they enter the lobby of Smilow. Similar smiling faces serve in the Breast Center and the Smilow Patient and Family Resource Center. They circulate through treatment areas with the Look Your Best Basket at Yale (LYBBY) cart, also known as the Looking Forward Program. The cart provides donated bandanas, lip balms, lotions, and other patient care items and support materials.

For her role in the customer services volunteer program, Ms. Cheng makes the rounds of every patient room on the hematology/oncology inpatient floor every Saturday. She sees herself as looking after not only the patients’ physical needs—a warm blanket, a snack, a magazine for entertainment—

“I try to do whatever I can to help.”

but their spirit as well. “I try to do whatever I can to help,” she said. “What I do is not a big deal. But I know by their reaction that I am doing something positive, to give them pleasure and help them actively participate in life.”

A HEALING HELPING HAND

Like oncology medicine itself, Smilow’s volunteer program is always evolving. Feedback from patients, family, staff members, and volunteers themselves helps to shape the current offerings and inspire new ones.

Anne-Marie Rosaler has played an active role in that process. After her treatment at Smilow for early stage breast cancer in 2011, Ms. Rosaler knew she wanted to return as a volunteer. She has since served in many roles during her weekly volunteer shift: staffing the LYBBY cart, participating in the early stage breast cancer support group, and helping relaunch the Patient4Patient

one-on-one counseling program.

But Ms. Rosaler felt that something was missing: Zumba. The exercise program had helped her quickly recover her health and strength after her treatment. “It was fun and so helpful to me mentally and physically,” she explained. “I thought, ‘This is a good idea to share with other patients.’”

She took her idea to the Integrative Medicine (IM) Program, where other volunteers were already providing Reiki and creative expression. Their services accounted for around 960 volunteer hours in 2017. “Integrative medicine makes use of all appropriate therapeutic and lifestyle approaches and healthcare disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing,” explained Dana Brewer, Creative Expression Coordinator for the IM Program. “Volunteers allow IM to expand services and offerings, thus providing more choices to enhance the quality of life for our patients and families.”

Ms. Rosaler had to fine-tune her proposal a bit. After she earned certification in a lower-intensity version called Zumba Gold, which was better suited for patients, she received enthusiastic approval to launch a twice-monthly class at Smilow. Her sessions are as much talk therapy as dance therapy, as participants share stories from their cancer journeys.

“For me, volunteering is therapeutic,” she said. “To see so many volunteers sharing their time—often when they themselves are undergoing treatment—is so inspiring and comforting. I feel privileged to be a part of this community.”

