

JourneyCare volunteers drive care for hospice, veterans

MARY COMPTON
Freelance Reporter

Celebrating one year in Mokena, JourneyCare and KidsCare has already made an impact helping others in hospice care. JourneyCare serves nearly 3,000 adult and pediatric patients and their families each day.

Mokena resident Kristine Wszolek, who is a Hospice CareCenter Patient Care volunteer, has given 10 years volunteering for JourneyCare.

“Before JourneyCare this was Horizon Hospice” Wszolek said. “I say this is a calling. I saw a booth at a community event and they were asking for hospice volunteers.”

There are several ways that JourneyCare uses volunteers. There are care service volunteers who are trained in massage, Reiki and aromatherapy. Volunteers with musical talent can sing, play an instrument or share music with a patient. There is another group of volunteers called the Knit Wits who create comfort items, such as blankets for patients.

“I had a co-worker go in to hospice because he had cancer, that helped me make up my mind,” Wszolek said. “I went on to a volunteer training and knew I was meant to do this.”

Wszolek volunteers on weekends. She sees about three patients a week visiting homes and various assisted living facilities.

“I’m a friendly visitor just to be company and talk to them,” she said. “I’ve never been turned away. Everyone is happy to be able to talk to someone.”

Training sessions are offered in the Mokena office, located at 9550 Bormet Drive Suite 104, for potential volunteers.

JourneyCare has an off-

shoot for children and teens called KidsWhoCare. Children and teens can participate in any of the kits, clubs, CareShop or collection projects.

High school students meet monthly during the school year between October and May at the Mokena office. A formal application and letter of recommendation is required. Led by staff of the JourneyCare Foundation, this group focuses on developing leadership skills through mentoring of the Juniors, developing and creating service projects, and supporting the agency at foundation and agency events.

“One of the best things we bring out are the bags the KidsWhoCare put together along with handmade cards they draw and write in” explained Christine Rechsteiner, volunteer supervisor and the KidsWhoCare coordinator at the Mokena office. “There was one lady who said she had a hard time connecting with the patient. I gave her a bag to take. When the patient read the card she started to giggle, that broke the ice. It let’s patients know that kids are thinking of them and doing stuff for them.”

Twins Jackie and Allison Kerlin, from Frankfort, have been volunteering for over a year.

“I know we’re helping people doing this,” Allison said. “We make cards for hospice patients because we want to make them smile. I like to make cards that have jokes in them because they make me laugh, as well. Sometimes we get to deliver to the patients and talk with them. It makes my day brighter.”

Allison encouraged her friend Claire Daly to volunteer, she came to also give back to KidsWhoCare who volunteered for the first time.

“This is fun because I get to hang out with my friends and help people,” said the 10-year-old Daly, from Tinley Park. “It’s important to volunteer because you’re helping out your community.”

Daly said she is planning on joining the JourneyCare Junior Club.

Volunteers work with trained leaders for a set amount of time for education, service and leadership training. While learning to celebrate life at all stages, children discover how they can support the communities they serve, participate in intergenerational activities with nursing home patients, and work on projects to bring a little joy to the patients and their families, such as Bingo and board games.

“I really like going to the senior center and playing games with them,” Jackie said. “[I like] making a card and knowing it’s going to someone who needs a little light in their life. My veteran’s card was one of my favorites.”

The youth volunteers get excited when they see Mary Cernak along with her four-legged friend L.G., a therapy dog. L.G., a Weimaraner breed.

“I’ve done pet therapy with my other dogs for about twenty years,” Cernak said. “The people get so happy seeing the dogs, especially if they’ve had dogs before and now they can’t have any pets being in assisted living facilities.”

“Bringing L.G. makes them happy. It brings back memories they had with their pets. I know L.G. is making an impact on a person’s life. He brings a smile to their day. It doesn’t take much.”

JourneyCare is one of the only nonprofit hospices in the Chicago area that is



Christine Rechsteiner (far left), volunteer supervisor for JourneyCare Foundation pets therapy dog L.G. as his owner Mary Cernak (far right) looks on. PHOTOS BY MARY COMPTON/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

recognized by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization as a partner in the We Honor Veterans program. The program recognizes current and former military members for their service, and assists them in accessing benefits they are entitled to receive. The staff is specially trained to work with veterans who have war-related post-traumatic stress syndrome.

“We do pinnings for veterans,” Rechsteiner said. “If a patient has been a military vet, we will send out a veteran who will give the veteran a certificate and pin them. The nice thing about having a veteran-to-veteran [program] is that they can salute them. We’re always looking for veteran volunteers.”

The next training for JourneyCare volunteers is scheduled for 9 a.m.-3 p.m. April 2.

“We want to bring awareness of being kind to people,” Rechsteiner said. “There are



Eleven-year-old twins Jackie (left) and Allison Kerlin, from Frankfort, pack bags at JourneyCare in Mokena that will be given to hospice patients. The girls have volunteered for almost two years for JourneyCare.

many programs we do, so we send out volunteers at no charge. The whole organization is all about giving back

to the community.”

For more information, visit journeycare.org or call (708) 441-8268.