

Innovative center helps the caregivers

By PRISCILLA WHITLEY

Navigating a hospital can be daunting, not only for the patient but also for the caregiver. Their burdens might include conversing with doctors and nurses, sitting quietly for long hours, and carrying home with them the worry of a loved one who is suffering.

For those who have family or friends at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, the Ken Hamilton Caregivers Center is on a mission to help them manage the stress and sometimes complex issues that arise out of the caregiving role.

A little over 10 years ago, Marian Hamilton found herself suddenly caring for her husband, Ken, who suffered a serious medical emergency. Even though she was satisfied that her husband was receiving excellent care and had wonderful, supportive friends to help her as she went through this ordeal, she felt she couldn't always burden them with all the emotions she was feeling. She vowed during that time to find a way to provide caregivers not only a place for themselves in the hospital, but a way to offer them the care they also needed. That led to the founding of the Ken Hamilton Caregivers Center in 2006, which has since been an integral part of Northern Westchester Hospital.

"When someone enters the hospital," Jill Gottlieb, the replication coordinator at the center, said, "the whole family is impacted. The family caregiver didn't sign up for this job, didn't necessarily want this job and most likely is not trained for this job. It can be overwhelming with emotions. That's why we're here."

Walking into the center, located on the ground floor of the hospital, one leaves behind the sterile atmosphere a hospital must provide. The space feels more like a gracious living room. The soft light, deep leather chairs, a skylight of clouds overhead and a calming waterfall invoke a Zen-like ambience. Computers are available and so is a private room, outfitted with a massage chair. There are no televisions. The din of the hospital is left behind.

"When people cross that threshold into our center," Ms. Gottlieb said, "you can almost feel their blood pressure go down. This is a very safe environment for anyone to come to."

Jeri Rosenfeld, the center's social worker, is the only other employee. The remaining staff, which number nearly 35, are all volunteers.

Needs vary, and each volunteer is trained to attend to whatever the individual caregiver requires. This could include answering their questions about the hospital's discharge policy or rehabilitation resources, or even something as seemingly basic as navigating the hospital's different departments.

Luann Morris, a Katonah resident, has been volunteering at the center for the past seven years. "I'll never forget the day Jerri walked into my room and introduced herself. I'd been caring for my husband in various hospitals, and no one ever approached me on that level. And she was there for me for the entire time. I realized I had another place, another person to lean on that wasn't a family member or a friend. I needed that. It lightened my load in a way my load hadn't been lightened



AARON KERSHAW PHOTO

Jerri Rosenfeld, social worker; Marian Hamilton, founder of the Ken Hamilton Caregivers Center; and Jill Gottlieb, center coordinator.

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in a long time. I knew then I'd be back to make it my turn to help others go through whatever they wanted."

Volunteers enter a patient's room only if a caregiver is present, or they receive information from a nurse or doctor of someone who could use support. The entire hospital staff assists with the process of helping caregivers, including food services and administration staff. Their help can be as seemingly small as listening or as meaningful as arranging an in-hospital wedding or birthday.

"The sweetest thing happened while my mom was in the ICU," Ms. Morris recounted. "It was a difficult time and my sister-in-law's birthday. What do you do? How do you celebrate when you're in such a state of sadness? I mentioned those two feelings to Jerri and a little while later up came a birthday cake to the ICU. Somehow it's these random acts of kindness that the Ken Hamilton Caregiver Center really stand for. Small for someone else, so meaningful to our family."

Recently the center developed a new program called "Stay in Touch." Leaving the hospital after being surrounded by medical personnel in the hospital and returning home with a convalescing patient can cause an entirely different set of anxieties and questions. In this program the

volunteers follow up with caregivers whom they visited in the hospital, continuing a nurturing relationship and providing ongoing support. Again, they do whatever the caregiver needs to ease their burden. In short, they provide a lifeline to those who might feel alone.

The Caregiver Center at Westchester Northern has been so successful it's now been replicated within other hospitals.

"Currently we are (operating) in 11 other institutions," Ms. Gottlieb said. So-called "quaternary care hospitals," which Ms. Gottlieb said are the highest level of hospitals, including Montefiore Hospital and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, "have adopted our program," along with smaller community hospitals. "We walk them through every step of the process and twice a year meet with employees and volunteers, offering training tools and seminars."

She continued, "We're always trying to share our program because we've had such success and feel so strongly about taking care of those who take care of others. We call it a 'Grassroots Caregiving Movement' for this struggling population. In the health care field we believe caregivers need to be given attention, and this program addresses their needs in an incredibly helpful way."

Or in the words of one caregiver whom the Center assisted: "The coaches dedicate their lives to complete strangers, to give them what they need in a time they need it most."

For more information on the Ken Hamilton Caregivers Center at Northern Westchester Hospital, call 666-1200 or visit nwhc.net.