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Fort Wayne man's volunteering at Heritage Park has become like a second family



Denny Parker, left, chats with, from left, Marna Bixler, Berneice Newsom and Lois Kaufman at Heritage Park senior health community on Hobson Road. Heritage Park staff recently honored Parker for his volunteer work there, which began while he was a patient there and recovering from major surgery. (By Kevin Kilbane of News-Sentinel.com)

Denny Parker credits staff at Heritage Park senior health community with helping save his life. Now he's helping them improve life for other patients.

"The residents captured my heart when I first came here," Parker, 64, said Wednesday, one of the days the Fort Wayne resident volunteers at Heritage Park.

The 172-bed senior community recently honored Parker for his dedicated volunteer service by presenting him with its Compassion Award at the Feb. 7 Fort Wayne Komets hockey game at Memorial Coliseum.

GETTING INVOLVED

When Parker arrived at Heritage Park in 2010, he had just completed a lengthy hospital stay after major surgery. Hospital staff had called in his family three times to say goodbye, thinking he was near death each time.

Heritage Park staff, especially those in physical therapy, worked with him for months until he recovered.

“After they got me back on my feet, I got bored just doing nothing,” he said.

He met Sherrie Murphy, the activities director, who invited him to help other residents as a volunteer while he still was a resident there himself.

Parker said he pushed residents in wheelchairs to therapy appointments and activities. He also made coffee in the mornings and pushed the cart to pass out doughnuts to people.

When he had recovered enough to go home in 2011, Murphy suggested – “told” him, he said jokingly – to fill out an application to become a community volunteer there. He did it gladly.

“I wanted to give back to the Almighty God,” he said. “He let me live.”

“ONE OF A KIND”

Parker now arrives about 4:30 to 5 a.m. Saturdays and Sundays to pass out newspapers to residents and to put the backing on lists of the day’s activities, which he then places on breakfast tables.

He also typically helps out on Wednesday and Thursday evenings, which can include passing out popcorn.

“He works a lot,” Murphy said. “He is caring, and residents see that.”

Parker said he spends a lot of his time just talking to people or listening to them. Many don’t have many outside visitors, he said, so they appreciate the chance to chat.

“He’s one of a kind,” resident Marna Bixler said. “If you need something, he will try to get it or do it, or find somebody who can.”

Resident Lois Kaufman said she seconds all of Bixler’s praise for Parker.

A SPECIAL CONNECTION

Heritage Park residents also appreciate one other perk Parker makes possible:

He worked for 40 years at Fort Wayne’s Famous Coney Island Weiner Stand, where he was known as “Tiny,” and he still volunteers there. So he often brings coney dogs to Heritage Park residents, especially as a treat for the weekly Trivia Night or other events.

Parker also volunteers as a commissioner with the Police Athletic League (P.A.L.) football program. He previously volunteered for 20 years with P.A.L. as a coach.

Parker, who lives only a few blocks away from Heritage Park, plans to keep volunteering there as long as he can.

“It’s like a second family to me,” he said of the staff.