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

Kristin Rattini writer Peter Baker photographer
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.

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

Serving in the Army during the Vietnam War, Tom Jacquot faced many dangers, but he had no idea one of his greatest battles would come decades later, fighting an unfamiliar foe: cancer. After moving from Connecticut to North Carolina, Tom developed a purple, itchy spot on his back that his doctor thought might be a cyst. After a biopsy and several tests, it was confirmed that what he had was blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm (BPDCN), a rare cancer involving his skin, bone marrow, and lymph nodes.

Since the first case of BPDCN was reported in 1994, only a few hundred cases have been recorded. Having received a diagnosis of an extremely rare and aggressive cancer, Tom knew two things for certain: he wanted to be treated at a world-class cancer center, and he wanted to be near family. This led him to The Veterans Affairs (VA) Comprehensive Cancer Center in West Haven under the direction of Michal G. Rose, MD, and to Smilow Cancer Hospital, under the care of Iris Isufi, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine (Hematology).

Tom would come to refer to Dr. Isufi as his ‘life-saver’ and she got right to work on a treatment plan. Due to the rarity of his disease, there was not much data available on the best treatment options. It was up to Dr. Isufi and her team to come up with the best care plan for Tom. Knowing there is a high risk of recurrence, it was suggested that Tom undergo an allogenic stem cell transplant, where cells are transferred from a donor. Tom was treated with an aggressive leukemia chemotherapy regimen shortly after he arrived at Smilow. Treatment was challenging, requiring several hospitalizations; however, he responded very well to chemotherapy.

“Tom’s cancer and treatment plan were very complicated and he underwent an aggressive treatment regimen. This required constant communication between myself and Dr. Rose’s team at the VA to make sure he was receiving the correct prescriptions, tests, etc.” said Dr. Isufi. “This is a disease that moves fast, and we had to be faster.”

Following a one-month hospitalization under the care of a specialized stem cell transplant team, Tom’s care continued in the Smilow outpatient transplant clinic. A few months after the transplant, Tom lost the donor stem cells, and arrangements were made for his donor to give more stem cells, and he underwent additional chemotherapy. This attempt was successful, and he has had 100% donor blood cells since then. Five years out from his transplant, and again living in North Carolina, Tom encountered other unrelated health issues. He was scheduled for a routine endoscopy to monitor his Barrett’s esophagus, when he was dealt another blow—a diagnosis of stomach cancer.

“I say that God kept changing his mind about me,” said Tom. “After receiving the first diagnosis and learning what my...