

Health System Volunteers Lend a Helping Hand

By Yadira Galindo | November 10, 2014

Over the past eight years, Gloria Lynch, PhD, a three-time cancer survivor, has spent more than 1,600 hours at UC San Diego Moores Cancer Center, but not as a patient. She is one of 670 [UC San Diego Health volunteers](#) who share their personal experiences and spare time to help patients during clinical visits.

Lynch, a retired psychiatrist who practiced in La Jolla for 47 years, bakes homemade treats for patients who spend anywhere from one hour to all day receiving treatment at the Moores Cancer Center Infusion Center. Most often Lynch can be found staffing the Resource Center, which offers services from information about specific conditions to wig fittings for patients undergoing chemotherapy.



Gloria Lynch, PhD

“People come with very different needs,” said Lynch. “Some patients come in and want to talk about anything other than cancer. Others feel they can’t speak to their family and just need someone to listen to them for a minute.”

Whether offering a compassionate ear, greeting patients with a smile as they walk through the doors or assisting a nurse, volunteers logged more than 90,000 hours in 2013 alone at the UC San Diego Health facilities in Hillcrest and La Jolla.

“Volunteers can help in care areas by providing additional support to both patients and staff,” said Judy Bradrick, UC San Diego Health director of Volunteer Services. “There is a diverse selection of activities for volunteers, including running errands in labs, spiritual care, pet therapy and even music. The first time we took music into the burn unit, the nurse case manager told me that there were no pain medications dispensed during the hour the musicians played. It was beautiful.”

Each location has special volunteer needs and the La Jolla locations – including Moores Cancer Center, Thornton Hospital and Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center – currently have a need for additional assistance.

Bradrick and Lynch would like to see more adult cancer survivors volunteer. Mature volunteers offer not just compassion, they often relate to patients undergoing treatment. They may understand how it feels when a patient first looks in the mirror after experiencing hair loss or when a person's taste for their once favorite foods vanishes.

Lynch recalls two sisters who visited the Resource Center. One sister was resolute in comforting her ill sibling by cooking healthy meals, but the two had become frustrated with another. The women confided in Lynch and explained that the patient was not eating the meals her sister lovingly prepared.

"When I was undergoing treatment, I wanted only coffee and hardboiled eggs, everything else tasted awful," said Lynch, who was treated at different times for breast, ovarian and skin cancers. "I told the sister 'Don't push any foods and don't feel bad if she won't eat your special meals. Instead, find something that tastes OK and stock up until her taste buds return to normal.' Understanding that this is normal helped. They left feeling better about their relationship."

When Lori Lee McIntosh was diagnosed with appendix cancer, a rare type of disease that can metastasize throughout the abdominal cavity, she joined a cancer support group, however, no one in the group had been through the kind of aggressive treatment being considered for her. McIntosh was sent to Moores Cancer Center to undergo HIPEC, or [heated intraperitoneal chemoperfusion](#), a therapy designed to kill remaining cancer cells left behind after surgical removal of tumors.

Prior to her surgery, McIntosh met a woman through an online cancer support group who had been through the surgery and who offered to share her experience.

"She had two small children and I had children," said McIntosh. "It was hard for me to leave my kids for seven to 10 days for the surgery. I asked her how she prepared her kids to be without their mom. It really helped to speak with someone with similar life experiences."

After recovering from her surgery, McIntosh and her daughter began to create care packages that included handmade blankets for patients undergoing HIPEC treatment and with it is a special note with her contact information.

"I wanted to be able to talk to patients about what to expect to help them get through it," said McIntosh. "They're looking to someone to know they're going to be OK after the surgery, that their quality of life will still be good."

McIntosh believes that talking to patients in person helps them to see that she's healthy, that there is hope. So she became the president of the HIPEC Ambassador Program through Volunteer Services. McIntosh now makes trips from Orange County to meet with patients personally as well as coordinate this new volunteer group which is currently made up of 12 people, including her 16-year-old daughter who focuses on supporting children and teens.



Hana Rivera-Garza and her mother Alejandra Garza.

“Sometimes just a smile makes a difference in a person’s day,” said Alejandra Garza, who along with her 16-year-old daughter, Hana Rivera-Garza, began volunteering in January.

Encouraged by her daughter’s interest in studying medicine, Garza decided to volunteer at the Moores Cancer Center Infusion Center while her daughter spends her time at Thornton Hospital. Garza helps the nursing staff by running errands, making sure the team has a fresh supply of gloves, tubes and other

medical supplies.

“Some days nurses have to go from one end of the building to the other and they don’t have time to do everything,” she said. “I can come in and simply clean the chairs with disinfectant wipes and put clean towels and blankets down. It’s the small details that help when a patient arrives.”

Patients are very thankful, said Garza. One woman, a Spanish speaker, told her she wanted her treatments to coincide with the days that Garza volunteered because she felt comforted chatting with Garza in Spanish.

“Many people don’t speak English and they are happy to find someone they can talk to about their experiences in their native language,” said Garza.

Her daughter, Garza-Rivera, has also used her bilingual skills at Thornton Hospital, but she says most patients want to ask her why such a young woman is spending her free time volunteering.

“You get more out of it than the people you help,” said Garza-Rivera, who wants to be a surgeon. “Every time I leave Thornton I feel better and I appreciate life more. You don’t really understand how people really feel. You have to volunteer to experience it for yourself to really understand.”

UC San Diego Health is always looking for volunteers. With many opportunities available to assist patients, there is a role for just about anyone to fill. For more information visit the [Volunteers Services website](#), call 619-543-6370 or email at volsvcs@ucsd.edu.
