The Therapy of Friendship

By Lisa Champeau

They joke around a lot—three women in their 80s who never thought they’d find anything funny about being in a hospital. At the Good Shepherd Wayne Memorial Inpatient Rehabilitation Center, the women did expect rigorous physical therapy workouts. But humor? And friends to boot?

“Smile!” says Else Hildebrandt of Honesdale to her roommate, Myrtie Curtis, who is sitting across a table in the unit’s therapy gym. Else is working a jigsaw puzzle; Myrtie, who hails from Greentown, is putting pegs into a board. Both activities improve motor coordination and concentration. Myrtie shrugs. Her newfound friends say Myrtie is the truly funny one.

“I never expected to be this outgoing,” Myrtie says, “especially while working on getting my legs to go backwards and forwards.”

Mary Jaeger looks on and laughs from a wheelchair. The 84-year-old from Honesdale admits she’s the one who got the friendships going. “I was the instigator for us all to start talking. You know sometimes people just sit here and don’t mingle. We talk about our problems and how to overcome them. We’re all striving for the same thing—to get better.”

Occupational Therapy Assistant Suzanne Fodor chimes in. “We try to encourage patients to come out of their rooms, but some just won’t. Sometimes there’s one, though, who won’t take no for an answer and gets the others going.”

Jaeger landed in the unit after suffering a stroke while driving. She pulled over when she felt “weird,” she explains. Her daughter, Sharon Bradley, who was in a car behind her mother, knew something was wrong when she saw her mother’s left arm “flopping.”

Sharon and her mother consider themselves lucky—they were able to get help quickly, and now, in the Good Shepherd unit, they’ve both found friends. That’s right. All three women have daughters about the same age who have also become friends.

Every afternoon for several weeks at the end of the summer, the six women find themselves chatting and laughing. Sharon teases her mother about the rowing machine exercises—“Are you ever going to actually get somewhere?”

“Our mothers all support each other in their therapies,” says Sharon, “They all have good therapists.”

Mary confirms her daughter’s thoughts. “Even on your worst day, they (the therapists) pull you right out of it, get you to not feel sorry for yourself.”

“My mother was very independent, and this has been tough,” admits Klarissa Peterson, who came up from North Carolina to be with her mother. Else, 85, was admitted for severe pain in her left leg.

“When she arrived, she told the doctor, ‘These are all my original parts; don’t take anything out and put in something that doesn’t belong there.’” Klarissa laughs and adds, “With her new friendships, it feels more comfortable having a connection, more connections with her therapy. They (the patients) were up talking last night. They had their hair done together. They have tea and whatever—crumpets—at 3 p.m. It’s great.”

For Klarissa, her mother’s admission to Wayne Memorial was especially poignant. Her father died in the hospital almost twenty years earlier. “Being back was strange, but I’ve been put at ease. The care is consistent, and everyone has been phenomenal. When my mother came here from the 4th floor, the nurse who brought her hugged and kissed her.”

“I’ve had very good care here,” Else agrees. She adds that talking to others in the unit, namely Myrtie and Mary, has also been helpful. “We all had the same idea: to get better.”

Will she continue the friendships after she leaves? “Why not?” Else says as if it were a silly question to ask, “It helped me here. I got rid of my pains.”

Myrtie’s daughter, Judy Haff of Greentown, expresses something similar. “I have high hopes my mother will walk without even a cane in three months. It’s nice to know my mom has a good roommate at night. And we’re going to share email addresses, all of us.”

Judy looks around the Recreation Room, where the women have gone to eat lunch after therapy. She sums up the situation and grins. “We all love to yak,” she says, “and I guess that’s good therapy.”