DHMC Auxiliary marks 75 years of service as a “fairy godmother”

It took 75 years and there was no magic wand involved—just a lot of hard work. But the DHMC Auxiliary turned a pile of pumpkins and squash into something as splendid as Cinderella’s coach (and more long-lasting). Surely that qualifies for fairy-godmother status.

Anniversary: The transformation wrought by the Auxiliary is detailed in A Gift of Service, a book marking the group’s 75th anniversary. The organization’s genesis lay in a need to generate cash donations for Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital during the depths of the Depression. There was already an elaborate system by which residents of nearby towns delivered gifts of produce each fall for use in the Hospital kitchen. Donation Day, as it was called, was a matter of town pride, as residents competed to see which towns mustered more gifts. The squash, cabbage, and potatoes that piled up on the MHMH lawn were a great help in feeding patients through the winter, but what the Hospital really needed was money.

Day: So raising funds was the Auxiliary’s charge when it came into being on October 21, 1933, that year’s Donation Day. Anyone who dropped off produce automatically became a member of the new group, which went on to hold benefits and an annual fund drive. Two years later, in 1935, the Auxiliary brought in cash contributions totaling $2,510.

Today, by contrast, the Auxiliary raises over $300,000 a year and marshals a cadre of 500 some volunteers active in about 50 programs. Such splendor has come with a price, however. The Auxiliary’s current president, Barbara Blough, says there was a sense of belonging in the group’s early years that she’d like to re-capture. Blough, who is director emerita of alumni affairs for DMS, has been an Auxiliary volunteer since her retirement in 1990. One of her goals as president is to make today’s hundreds of volunteers more aware of the organization’s history. The publication of the book was one means of doing that.

Shop: “There are so many areas into which volunteerism has extended. It makes us very different from other hospitals,” says Blough, who—with her late husband, Foster—was named Quarter-Century Volunteer Honoree in 2008. For example, although many hospitals have a gift shop, DHMC’s Pink Smock Shop has always had volunteer buyers as well as cashiers. All the shop’s net proceeds either support the work of the Auxiliary or are awarded in grants for patient-care improvement projects at DHMC.

The Auxiliary also underwrote construction of the chapel when the new Medical Center was built in 1991. And many of the works of art in DHMC’s public spaces were purchased with Auxiliary gifts.

But as valued as the organization’s dollars have been, it’s the volunteer hours that have made...
the biggest difference—from the smiling faces at the information desks to the friendly escorts who help patients find their way from one department to another. Auxiliary volunteers are present wherever patients or their families need support—from the Infusion Suite to the Emergency Department. They offer art therapy, play music, and deliver flowers and books.

**Bingo:** Volunteers also run a weekly bingo game—piped in to every patient room over closed-circuit TV. That effort alone entails assembling 250 packets of game supplies, emceeing the game itself, and then delivering prizes to the winners.

One of the most unusual volunteer jobs at DHMC was conceived and filled by chemistry professor John Amsden when he retired from Dartmouth. He set up shop as a Medicare consultant for patients when the program began in 1966. His model was later promulgated to hospitals nationwide by the federal agency that oversees Medicare.

Among the Auxiliary’s newer programs are two that require special training of volunteers: Befriend, which offers peer support to patients with breast cancer, and No One Alone, which serves patients in the palliative-care program.

**Work:** “We now take for granted what we have in DHMC,” says Blough. “I’d like people to realize the long period of development.” She knows there’s no magic wand—and that the success of the next 75 years depends on today’s hard work.

_Rosemary Lunardini_