

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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IMPACT *of* VOLUNTEERING

Fueling Growth, Connection, and Shaping Our Community



“ Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a battle. ”
Plato

CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

LAURIE COMSTOCK

Visiting Nurses Association

By Emily Mulligan, photos by Steven Hertzog



These local organizations could not provide their services without an army of volunteers behind them.

In Douglas County, volunteers are essential for some organizations to carry out their mission. No volunteers means not accomplishing the purpose the group has set out to do.

Visiting Nurses Association (VNA) has a network of volunteers who spend time as companions to homebound and hospice patients in between visits from skilled nurses and other professional staff. The Lied Center deploys a cadre of volunteers at every event and performance to usher and guide the public around the building and auditorium. The LMH Gift Shop is staffed by a slate of volunteers.

Without their collective army of volunteers, these organizations could not perform their functions. It's accurate to say that the quality of life in Douglas County is uplifted by volunteers.

Hospice Companion

Laurie Comstock began volunteering for VNA about 15 years ago when her kids were in college. She had participated in Leadership Lawrence and learned about VNA and its continual need for volunteers. She says she always has enjoyed spending time with the elderly, so VNA seemed like a good fit for her spare time.

Here she is, a decade and a half later, having logged hundreds and hundreds of volunteer hours with people and families of Douglas County in one of the most tender and difficult stages of life. Comstock typically volunteers with one or two patients at a time when a family makes the decision to utilize hospice care. She spends time with the patient weekly at his or her home or care facility to provide companionship and comfort.

“When I'm old, I want someone to be patient and caring with me,” Comstock says. “I've had really great experiences developing relationships over many months. I can add to their lives, and they add to mine.”

Comstock freely admits she's a talker and a people person, so it's easy for her to appear in patients' lives and find out what they have in common for topics of conversation. Often, people are slow to warm up, and some are experiencing dementia. Comstock has a good sense for making them comfortable with her presence. Usually, that builds up to them asking her to do particular activities with them on her visits. She says she has played card games, read stories, played Scrabble and talked about the patients' lives with them.

VNA volunteers select their patients, and Comstock chooses elderly patients who are in hospice care. She has learned a great deal about the end of life through VNA's training and her own now-vast experience.

“I try to be comforting, stable and understanding. My visits help me be the eyes and ears for the hospice nurses, social workers, etc. Hopefully I'm helpful to them, too,” she says.

Hospice care started as a voluntary care group, and Medicare-certified hospice programs such as VNA are still required to incorporate volunteers for 5 percent of the service hours provided to patients, according to the Accreditation Commission for Health Care. So volunteers like Comstock are built into VNA's business model, which enhances patients' experiences, VNA hospice volunteer coordinator Sarah Rooney says.

“The volunteers provide a real human-to-human connection during hospice. They aren't a part of the team that has a job to do; they aren't taking the patient's pulse, for example,” Rooney says. “For families who can't afford home health care, the volunteer is there when someone just needs a break from caregiving—and it gives the patient a break, too.”

At any given time during the year, VNA has 25 to 30 volunteers regularly serving hospice patients. Most patients request volunteers for weekday hours, particularly late mornings or early afternoons, when caregivers need a respite to attend their own medical appointments or run errands. Rooney says hospice volunteering isn't an exact science; each patient's needs vary, and volunteers bring a range of experience and skills.

“The best volunteers are self-motivated, self-sufficient and willing to go ahead and just try. Some of it is really hard; creativity and humor definitely help,” Rooney says.

Comstock is unique because she always finds a way to connect with the patients and caregivers, she adds. And if the patient is grumpy or doesn't seem receptive to her, Comstock knows not to take it personally.

“When she's present with people, she's really paying attention. She's really concentrated on that person,” Rooney says.

VNA volunteers receive group emails from Rooney that give a general overview of each patient's scenario, and the volunteers select which patient they think will be the best fit, whether it's scheduling, location and/or other circumstances.

“When a caregiver really needs a break, that's what draws me right away,” Comstock says. “I can be helpful right off the bat, and then maybe we'll get along. Then, it's really fun to get to know them.”

“ Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others? ”

Martin Luther King, Jr.



CARLADYNE CONYERS

The Lied Center

Lied Center Usher

When Carladyne Conyers' husband passed away in 2007, a friend suggested she try to be an usher at the Lied Center. So Conyers checked into it, and not long afterward, she started becoming a fixture at Lied Center events and programs.

“People that are retired and don't do anything, that doesn't fit my category,” Conyers explains.

Ushering at the Lied Center gives her a place to be where her presence is valued and needed. Not to mention that she can absorb and participate in the arts community while she's at it.

“I absolutely love the Lied Center. I enjoy all the programs. It's kind of my home away from home. I sign up for almost every event, and pretty much all the time I stay because I want to see it,” Conyers says.

Longtime ushers get first pick of the events at the Lied Center, and all ushers who work an event are invited to stay and watch once their duties are completed. Conyers says she researches the slate of programs ahead of time so she knows about the artists and activities.

Ushers report for duty an hour or an hour and a half before the show, depending on the size of the crowd expected. They wear a uniform of black slacks, a white top, a black vest or jacket, and a name tag. The Lied Center's house manager conducts what is called an usher briefing once the ushers arrive, providing any important information the ushers may need to enforce or to pass along to guests. Ushers are at their posts when the doors open, usually one hour before the program begins, and they must remain on duty until 15 minutes after the show starts. Once they are released, if they choose to stay for the show, they may have an end aisle seat from which to enjoy the program.

Conyers has fun with the social aspect of ushering.

“I need to be doing this. I am a very outgoing, friendly person, and I love seeing the people,” she says.

The Lied Center boasts 125 active volunteers who provide 2,750 to 3,000 volunteer hours per season, Lied Center Executive Director Derek Kwan says.

“Volunteers are so critical to how we operate and critical to the success of the Lied Center. Volunteers are the first faces patrons see when they come into the building,” he continues.

The ushers, greeters and ticket-takers see one another regularly during the busy event seasons, and Kwan says they become like their own version of a family, checking up and checking in since the last time they were together. And with many volunteers who have been at the Lied Center for two decades or more, they grow close over time. They also come to know the patrons who regularly attend events.



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**ROBIN
GASCHLER**

LMH Gift Store

“Just as important to the business as the nuts and bolts, the numbers, the bottom line and all that are the relationships,” he adds. “Our volunteers are building meaningful, trustworthy relationships that become friendships.”

Conyers brightens her fellow volunteers’ and the Lied Center staff’s day when she comes to volunteer at events, Kwan says. Her positivity is infectious, and it extends among everyone, including the patrons.

“We joke around during intense event times, ‘Carladyne, your cot is ready for you,’ since she spends so much time here,” he explains. “What we appreciate is that she finds value and satisfaction in the experience, too.”

Conyers’ favorite events at the Lied Center are the daytime field trip events for local school children to see a performance, part of the Lied Center’s free school-only performances for preschoolers through high schoolers, featuring national acts. She says she likes ushering for the school performances so she can watch the reactions of the kids coming into the auditorium, looking around and taking it all in. She can overhear them talking to their friends about seeing the space and, often, saying they haven’t been there before. Conyers’ late father was Carl Knox, the superintendent of schools for 22 years, so the schoolchildren remind her how thrilled her father would be to know they get to experience the arts in the Lied Center, too.

**Hospital Gift
Shop Staff**

The hospital gift shop at LMH Health is not only a bright and cheerful place to be, it is also a non-profit venture. Proceeds from purchases fund needs at the hospital to the tune of more than \$100,000 annually. Other than the gift shop manager, the staff are all volunteers.

Robin Gaschler retired from being an audiologist at Children’s Mercy Hospital in 2020 and moved to Lawrence to be near her aging parents. Her father has since passed away, and now while she looks after her mom, she volunteers weekly with regular shifts in the gift shop at LMH.

Cindy Kruger manages the gift shop and schedules the volunteers. She has about 20 volunteers right now, but she is always looking for more.

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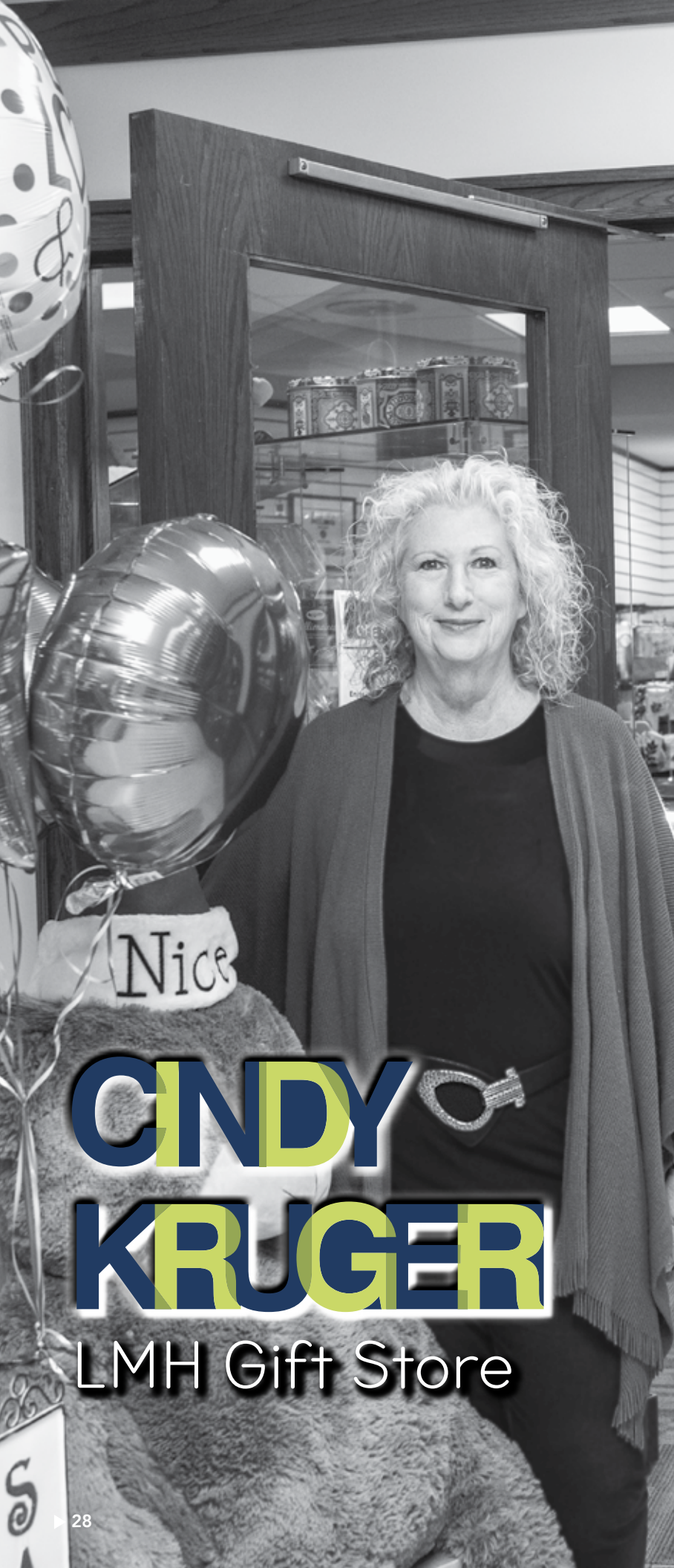
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which is a customer base we are trying to grow. When you shop with us, your dollar makes a difference, because the money goes back to the hospital," Kruger says.

Gaschler didn't have retail experience, but she now runs the cash register, prices inventory, restocks shelves and sorts displays in between assisting customers. Many customers are families visiting someone at LMH, but people coming for doctor's appointments and even the doctors and nurses themselves shop the store's unique and appealing variety of gifts.

"We have some frequent fliers," she says. "We know what time to expect them and what they buy. They come in to see the shiny things in the shop under the bright lights in the store."

Gaschler also helps out in Mario's Closet, the cancer-focused space founded by University of Kansas and NBA basketball player Mario Chalmers to provide wigs and other cancer-related products to those undergoing cancer treatment. It is attached to the gift shop, run by volunteers and managed by Kruger.

A visit to Mario's Closet was what drew her to learn about the gift shop volunteer opportunities in the first place. She went to buy something for a friend who was having a double mastectomy, but Mario's Closet was closed because there weren't enough volunteers to staff it that day. She went to the gift shop to ask about it and found out about the need for volunteers.

Gaschler admits to being a "sucker for fundraisers," so she says working in the gift shop assuages her desire to give; she gives her time toward the cause so people will spend money and fund the hospital's needs.

"Our volunteers are amazing women, and I can't say enough good things about them," Kruger says.

Volunteers Are Everywhere

Whether people go into a home to care for a loved one, attend a Lied Center event or shop in the LMH Health gift shop, they may not know the person they're talking to is a volunteer. Clearly, people relish the opportunity to help others—and to get their hands dirty while doing so. These three organizations, and many more throughout the county, could not function and serve without active, consistent volunteers. ▲

CINDY KRUGER

LMH Gift Store



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