

Smiles bring sunshine, hugs vanquish loneliness

Sisters are among hundreds of volunteers being honored

By [PAULA BARR](#) Daily Journal Staff Writer

Patrick DiBello is always welcome when he visits his terminally ill patients as a volunteer for HospiceCare, Inc., in Park Hills. But sometimes, the patients are more eager to see his helpers, 5-year-old granddaughter Corinne DeGonia and her 4-year-old sister Stephanie .



DiBello's blond granddaughters have smiles that bring sunshine into a room and hugs that are guaranteed to send loneliness packing. They are two of the hundreds of compassionate residents in St. Francois County being honored this week for their work as volunteers in a wide variety of service areas.

Today marks the beginning of Volunteer Appreciation Week, which is celebrated across the country. HospiceCare staff honored its volunteers early on Monday with a luncheon, certificates and gifts to show their appreciation for all that the 40 men and women - and two children - do for terminally ill patients and their families.

"Without you, we literally could not do our work," said Tammy Bracken, director of public relations. "You need to realize what powerful, powerful work you're doing."



DiBello and his granddaughters have been hospice volunteers for three years. Every other week, the trio visits patients in their houses or in nursing homes in an effort to bring them some comfort.

"It's fun to see sick people and help them feel better," Corinne said.

"I tell them jokes," Stephanie chimed in.

Corinne attends kindergarten at St. Joseph Elementary School in Bonne Terre, and Stephanie attends pre-school. Volunteering is part of living their education, DiBello said.

"The school promotes the value of the giving of time and self," he explained. "The Catholic Church has seven sacraments. Giving your time to others is like an eighth sacrament."

The girls tell their patients about their school experiences, sing songs, or just hold hands, depending on what the patients want that day. Visits vary in length, according to the patient's condition during the visit. Most days, their clients' eyes "perk up" when the children arrive, DiBello said.

He and his granddaughters get as much out of the experience as do their patients. Making a connection with patients is a great feeling and a wonderful reward, DiBello explained.

Volunteering has been a lifelong passion and a family tradition for DiBello. He and his four children volunteered for years in the St. Louis area through Christian Outreach, a Catholic program in which volunteers spend time in nursing homes.

DiBello credits his wife, Cathy, for her support.

"I have a wonderful wife who endorses what I do and helps me along the way," he said. "Without her, I probably wouldn't be involved."

The couple, who are the girls' guardians, moved to the Farmington area about three years ago. DiBello soon learned of an opportunity to volunteer for HospiceCare. Cathy was working full-time and Corinne was in day care. DiBello was faced with a dilemma - find a baby-sitter for Stephanie or give up volunteering.

He chose neither. Instead, he proposed bringing the girls with him on visits. Prior to accepting a new patient, he explains that the three are a team.

"I always discuss this with a new patient before visiting," he said. "If they don't want children around, they are assigned a different volunteer."

Before each visit, he also asks the girls if they want to accompany him. Only once in three years did they say "no," DiBello said. He had promised to bring the girls to the Civic Center that night.

Somehow, they had the impression that they wouldn't be back in time for the trip if they agreed to visit patients.

Corinne and Stephanie know that the people they visit are sick.

"They know that these people don't feel well and that we can't help them feel better physically, but we can help them feel better (emotionally)," DiBello said.

When patients die, DiBello talks about it with the girls.

"I tell them they (patients) reached a time where they are with Jesus," he said. "They have a good understanding (of death). My wife's mom died a year and a half ago, and they were very much involved in visiting her."

DiBello hopes to instill the love for volunteering in the girls so that they will carry on the family tradition when they have their own children.

"No one person is going to change the world, but you can change a piece of it," he said. "This is a job to be proud of."

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