

Greeters offer cancer patients compassion as soon as they arrive



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

Joyce Thomas, left, who works as a greeter at **Methodist Hospital**, hugs patient Cheryl Larson-Kear of Persia, Iowa, in January. Below, Joyce's colleague Ethel Martin, left, chats with her earlier this month. The women, both in their 60s, go beyond simply helping people find their doctors and hospital rooms — they nourish them with kind words.

They're the spoonful of sugar



Erin Grace
columnist

The first hospital face you'll see at Methodist's cancer center won't belong to a billing clerk.

Or a nurse or a doctor or an aide or a security guard.

Chances are, the first human to greet you at a place that has to deliver a lot of news, much of it bad, will belong to Joyce. Or perhaps Ethel.

That's Joyce Thomas, with the black hair that, on this day, has a

silver flip in front.

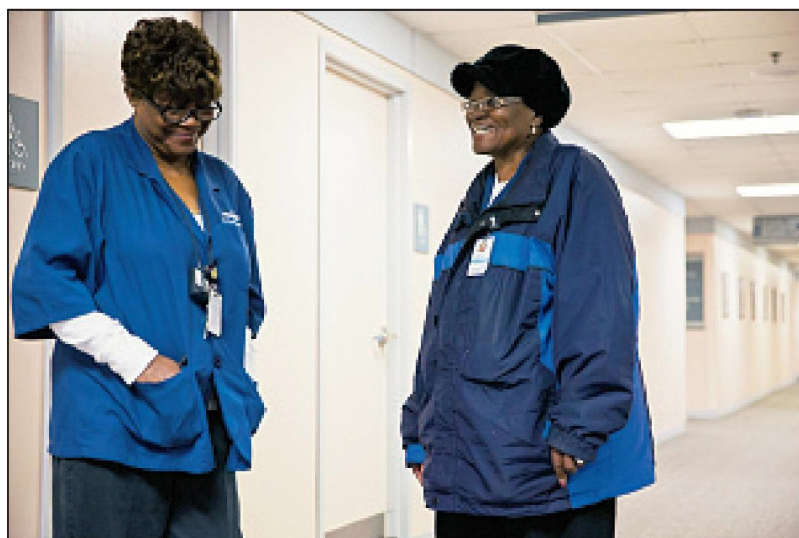
And Ethel Martin, the one with the Nikes that move faster than light.

Joyce, who is shy, with the shoulder to cry on. Ethel, who is not, with the rapid-fire repartee to make you laugh.

Both will "hey baby" you while they get your wheelchair, get your elevator, and get you to the right doctor at this white three-story building called Estabrook, which is connected to a maze of other offices at **Methodist Hospital**, south of 84th and Dodge Streets.

"You have a good day, honey," Joyce says to a patient who is on her way out the door.

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RYAN SODERLIN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Grace: Greeters can give comfort in a stressful time

“Hey, Captain, how are you? This is my MAN. This is my true MAN!” Ethel booms to the Navy vet she wheels in.

Joyce and Ethel are paid greeters who see their job as a mission. Though their encounters are often fleeting, they stand on the front line of cancer treatment. Their aim: to lower a patient’s anxiety, offer comfort, provide a little distraction.

The work is taxing physically. The women, both in their 60s, don’t sit. Often they are hoisting people into and out of wheelchairs and pushing them down long hallways and in and out of the cold.

And it’s emotional. They squeeze hands, give hugs, plant kisses. They laugh. They cry. They absorb the pain — and the joy — of the patients.

“Some days, they be down. Some days, they be up,” says Joyce in her soft Arkansas accent, standing at the rear door.

“I tell them I keep praying for them. Everything will be OK,” she said. “Sometimes, they say, ‘Oh, I be needing a hug.’ I say, ‘I be needing a hug something myself.’”

Joyce is 64. She knows fear when it comes to health (a hysterectomy at age 40, heart surgery several months ago). She knows loss (her son was shot and killed at age 21). She knows hard work (30 years at a dry cleaners). And she knows love. (Nearly 50 years of marriage).

“What I done been through,” she says, “I say I just move on sometimes.”

Ethel won’t say her age — just that she’s old enough to retire. But try to keep up with her. She moves fast in a long day that continues, after eight hours at Methodist, at the restaurant she runs at Louis’ bar in Benson.

On this day, Ethel is seeing most of the action.

Up front, she is running a wheelchair out to a parked minivan. “Hi, sweetheart, how are you?” she asks a woman who winces every time she tries to move.

Ethel holds the wheelchair with one foot and uses her arms to lift the woman’s legs out of the car. She holds the patient’s hand and tells her to step with her good foot. The patient shakes her head.

“You don’t have a good leg?” Ethel asks her.

“Nope,” says the woman.

“Don’t move. Don’t move,” Ethel says. She stoops, wraps her arms around the woman’s waist and says, “I got you. I’m not gonna let you fall.”

Minutes later, Ethel is on to the next woman in a wheelchair. She whisks the woman into the building, up an elevator to the second floor and deftly steers through a narrow passageway to reach Suite 250, Nebraska Cancer Specialists.

Five people wait in a room with a TV and three mannequin heads. One mannequin is wearing a wig, another a crocheted beanie and the third a pink head scarf.

Her next wheelchair passenger is a World War II veteran from Gretna who tries to tip her.

“Now you put that back in your pocket!” Ethel says, laughing. “No! No! No!”

“You naughty girl,” says the vet, smiling. “Shame on you.”

Ethel delivers the man to his appointment and kisses the 86-year-old’s smooth head.

The morning will bring its usual parade of patients. Some, like the girl with “carpe diem” tattooed on her arm, come with family members in tow. A number, like the beautiful woman with silver hair, perfect makeup and a purple blazer, come alone.

There are anxious first-timers and seasoned regulars. Some put on brave, jovial faces. Some are stoic but exceedingly polite.

At least one came in beaming.

“How ARE you?” Ethel practically shouts to Jon McAlpin of Omaha, who has cancer of the

small intestine.

“I’m here,” the 59-year-old says with a smile.

“I’m here, too. Every DAY,” she says. “Don’t that make you feel good?”

Quips McAlpin: “Oh, be still my tender heart.”

Then he flashes a triumphant grin.

“I got good results back,” he says. “They’re beating this. I really thought it was terminal. I really did.”

Ethel grins back. “What did I tell you?”

McAlpin: “You told me a lot of things.” Ethel gets the last word.

“One of the things I said? ‘Hold on.’”

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Greeter Joyce Thomas, right, visits with Sharon Bemis of Council Bluffs as she waits for her car on Jan. 14. Joyce’s goal is to lower patients’ anxiety.