

Jeanne Jaeckle: Volunteer Extraordinaire

It has all the trappings of a fabulous bash: a piano player with impromptu singers joining in, clusters of conversation at round tables and a generous sampling of delicacies for the crowd milling about.

At the center of the action is Jeanne Jaeckle, the commensurate host, who makes sure everyone is comfortable. Although this feels like a party, the people she's greeting are not guests;

they're patients entering the lobby of the Carol G. Simon Cancer Center. Every Wednesday morning, Mrs. Jaeckle and 10 fellow volunteers welcome patients to the cancer center with warm smiles and delicious snacks in conjunction with Music in the Atrium, which provides musical entertainment thanks to the Jeffrey Frank Wacks Memorial Fund.

"I'm always looking for a person who needs help," says Mrs. Jaeckle, who, true to her word, approaches an older man struggling to walk with his cane. Within moments she has commandeered a wheelchair and someone to assist the gentleman.

Mrs. Jaeckle's volunteer efforts were recently recognized by the Garden Club of Somerset Hills, which acknowledged her tireless commitment to helping patients at the cancer center. "It takes a rare person to do what she does," says Nancy Hance, co-president of the Garden Club of Somerset Hills, which provides floral arrangements along with the Morristown and Madison Garden Clubs.

When Mrs. Jaeckle, herself a cancer survivor, started Music in the Atrium nine years ago with Linda Wacks, Lisa DeRosa and Judie Gerstein, she knew flowers would be an essential ingredient. She took a cue from her late friend, Carol Simon, who for years sent weekly arrangements anonymously to oncology patients.

Midway through the morning on this Wednesday, a nurse from the chemotherapy floor gives word that she has a distressed patient. Snapping into action, Mrs. Jaeckle sends the roses to cheer her up.

All around, the lobby is abuzz. Volunteers, including Ed Jaeckle, Mrs. Jaeckle's husband, man the food tables, ensuring that the muffins, bagels, sandwiches and home-baked cookies remain plentiful. Food is served on colorful paper plates, and lamps from the couple's store, F. Gerald New in New Vernon, flank each clothed serving table.



Jeanne Jaeckle with patient Danielle Alperin

While Bob Egan plays the piano, volunteer Eileen Brown belts out the tune, "All I Want Is Music." The draw of the weekly festivities makes Wednesdays the busiest days at the cancer center, says Leah Oswanski, coordinator of music therapy: "People book their appointments to be here on Wednesdays."

What Mrs. Jaeckle and the other volunteers offer is a distraction for patients. "We don't know about their illness," she says. "We do know that they may not be having a great day, so we offer them a place to sit down and talk."

As she speaks, a woman sits down nearby next to her ailing husband, who is in a wheelchair. Mr. Egan asks if there's a song she'd like to hear. When she responds, "Never on Sunday," Mr. Egan asks if there are any Greeks in the house. The woman beams and sings along. "That just makes my day," says Mrs. Jaeckle, before getting up to pack the woman some treats to take home.

-Alice Roche Cody