

Tennessee Council on Volunteers Honors Retired FSRMC Nurse

Helen Vaughan Named Volunteer of the Year

When Helen Vaughan looks back on her 40 years in nursing, she says it all must have begun with a gift from her parents when she was only 10.

“I think my parents put the idea of nursing into my head when I was little,” said the 74-year-old Seymour grandmother and volunteer at Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center (FSRMC). “When I was in elementary school, they bought me a little nurse’s kit with a plastic stethoscope, plastic needle and thermometer. So I think they were pushing me toward that way.”

But more than a toy nursing kit, Vaughan’s parents also put a far greater gift into her heart: a caring spirit that earned her the 2019 Volunteer of the Year award from the Tennessee Council on Volunteers. The council supports the Tennessee Hospital Association and encourages volunteer participation in Tennessee healthcare organizations. Vaughan received the award at the council’s state leadership conference in October.

“To be a nurse, it has to be a calling, something that you love – you have to have a real need and fulfillment in your heart to help other people, and Helen has that. Helen is totally dedicated – 100 percent dedicated – to caring and helping others,” said



Helen Vaughan proudly shows off her 2019 Volunteer of the Year award.

Paula Minhinnett, volunteer services coordinator at Fort Sanders Regional.

At age 15, Vaughan began volunteering at the local hospital in Kingsport. “They had us doing a lot of everything,” she said. “I worked in central supply and helped fix food trays. I worked at the front desk and in physical therapy transporting patients.

“One of my favorite things was running the elevator. I

had a seat on the elevator and I would punch the buttons. I enjoyed talking to people, finding out where they were from, who they were going to see, whether it was a new baby or whatever.”

While in nursing school, her greatest enjoyment was the bedside experience. “We got to do almost anything that needed to be done – bathing the patients, turning them, feeding them, giving

their medicines, helping with the dressings,” she said.

Her can-do spirit continued after nursing school and well into her career. While working in Florida, she often volunteered to fly with patients who required nursing care while being transported to other facilities. “I flew in everything from a four-seater to a private jet to regular commercial airlines, taking patients to places like Maine,

San Diego, Louisiana, Illinois, Ohio,” she said. “I loved that.”

She also gained experience in hospital quality and case management, and served on the state board of the Florida Association of Healthcare Quality. When she later came to Knoxville, she was active in the start of the Tennessee Association of Healthcare Quality and served as a state officer.

After spending the last 15 years of her career at Fort Sanders Regional, Vaughan officially retired in 2011, only to return six months later as a volunteer. Because of her experience in quality improvement and case management, she first was assigned to the medical staff office.

Now, however, you’ll find Vaughan every Tuesday (and any other day she regularly fills in for other volunteers) in the hospital’s surgery lounge, answering phones and keeping track of as many as 40 patients’ families at a time. She keeps them informed, reassuring them and easing fears of anxious family members by explaining the surgical process.

“I enjoy that contact with people,” Vaughan said. “Families want to know what’s going on. They have in mind how long it’s going to take, and if it takes longer, they get upset. I try to explain to them because I’ve been on that side – I know why it

takes so long. I explain that they are doing the things they need to do to get ready for the surgery, and that takes a little bit of time. If a patient is going to have knee replacement or whatever, I can talk with them about the post-op phase and what it entails. I can tell them what it’s going to be like, and that helps.”

“Not only is she capable and very empathetic with other people, her leadership ability is reflected in her professional nursing groups,” said Minhinnett. “Even after her retirement she was always an officer, and she has served in every office of our Auxiliary.”

“I’ve always got to be doing something,” Vaughan said. “I don’t let the grass grow under my feet. I try to keep busy.”

With Vaughan, it’s always “patient first.” It’s a lesson learned not only as a nurse, but also as a patient herself.

“I’ve had 20-some surgeries over the last few years,” she said. “They took care of me, and so I go in and take care of someone else for a while.”

“Families actually ask for Helen when they arrive for their loved one’s surgery,” said Keith Altshuler, president and chief administrative officer at Fort Sanders Regional. “With her basic hospital knowledge and wit, Helen is an inspiration. Her 40 years of experience as a nurse has served us all well.”

Plenty of volunteer opportunities at FSRMC

Fort Sanders Regional is always in need of volunteers from all walks of life with a wide range of backgrounds, talents and experience. Whether greeting visitors, escorting patients, comforting a family in time of need or helping in the gift shop, FSRMC volunteers are known for their caring spirit and devotion to others.

If you are looking for ways in which you can serve others, the Fort Sanders Volunteer Auxiliary offers these programs:

- **Ask Me:** Volunteers will be stationed around the hospital to direct and escort visitors to the right place.

- **Auxiliary:** Auxiliary volunteers will assist with duties in a number of places, including the surgery lounge, front desks, gift shop and administration. The Auxiliary is governed by a twelve-member board with elected officers and is the sanctioned fundraising arm of Volunteer Services, voting on capital requests from Administration funded by proceeds from the hospital gift shop.

- **Baby Spoons:** Spoons are delivered to each newborn born at Fort Sanders Regional.

- **Fellowship Center:** Volunteers will assist guests of

the Fellowship Center, Fort Sanders’ hospitality house for families of patients from outside the region.

- **Heartstrings:** This volunteer musical group provides music therapy and entertains patients and visitors each month.

- **HABIT (Human Animal Bonding in Tennessee):** HABIT volunteers and their pets provide animal-assisted therapy.

- **Newborns in Need:** Volunteers prepare layette items for mothers to take home with baby.

- **NODA (No One Dies Alone):** Volunteers act as compassionate companions

to patients in their last moments of life.

- **Knitters:** Volunteers teach long-term maternity patients how to knit.

- **Patient Discharge Assistants:** Volunteers assist with patient discharges by escorting patients to their car and serving as the final friendly face before leaving the hospital

- **PEER:** Past stroke, spinal cord and brain injury patients mentor and encourage current patients about life after their illness. This role includes reading to patients, assisting with letter writing, or simply providing conversation and friendly company.

- **PEER Bariatric:** Past bariatric patients mentor and encourage current bariatric patients on living a healthy lifestyle.

- **Random Acts of Flowers:** Volunteers assist with the delivery of flowers.

- **Silk Pillowcases:** Handmade silk pillowcases are given to current chemo patients struggling with hair loss.

- **Stephen Ministry:** Stephen ministers are lay ministers trained to provide spiritual support to patients and caregivers.

- **Student Volunteers:** Our student volunteers (18 and older) share their special

gifts and energy with hospital patients and staff.

- **Thompson Cancer Survival Center (TCSC):** Cancer survivors mentor and assist current cancer patients. These volunteers also assemble baskets given to each new TCSC chemo patient.

Interested in becoming a volunteer? Learn more about opportunities at Fort Sanders Regional by contacting the Fort Sanders Volunteer Auxiliary at (865) 331-1249 or visit www.covenanthealth.com/volunteers/ to apply.



To ALL of Our Volunteers— Thank You!

For more than 50 years, members of the Fort Sanders Regional Volunteer Auxiliary have helped support the mission of Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center.

Want to learn more about volunteering at Fort Sanders Regional? **Call (865) 331-1249** or go to **fsregional.com**.