5000West
Clement J. Zablocki Medical Center
Vol. 5, No. 10
Holiday Issue

Photo by Benjamin Slane
Brittany Kowalke dressed as a holiday tree, tied for first place with Dan Davis (not pictured) from Green Bay for this year's ugly sweater contest.

Milwaukee VA's Annual Holiday Ugly Sweater Contest Winners: Brittany Kowalke and Dan Davis

Volunteers, employees make holidays brighter for Veterans

By Antony Kamps

Volunteers work through an assembly line to put together more than 500 gift bags filled with various gifts to distribute to different wards of the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

Holiday Gift Distribution is a more than 20-year tradition at the medical center. It's held by Voluntary Services, along with other Veteran service organizations.

A variety of different gifts such as calendars, Chap Stick, blankets, and assorted personal hygiene products are given to Veterans who are in-patients at the hospital. Airmen from the 128th Air Refueling Wing helped fill and distribute the bags to Veterans.

"We are so grateful that the 128th can come out here to help us distribute gifts to the patients here at the VA," said Stephanie Pulsfus, chief of Voluntary Services. "It means a lot to our veterans here."

The gift distribution event is just one of many different ways employees and volunteers bring in donations for Veterans. A coat donation program brought in more than 120 coats. They were distributed to the Men's and Women's Clothing Clinics, and to Veterans in need through local homeless programs in the city of Milwaukee.

"It's really amazing. The room we keep the coats in is just overflowing," said Jessica Serdynski, voluntary services specialist. "One group brought in more than 50 brand new, tags still on, jackets. Just amazing."

Photo by Brian Walker

Stephanie Pulsfus, chief of Voluntary Services, thanked all the volunteers and the 128th Air Refueling Wing for helping out at the 2014 Holiday Gift Distribution. More than 500 gift bags were handed out to Veterans in the hospital.

Holiday Giving 2014, overseen by Mary Lawien, collected five pallets of toys, stuffed animals and clothing. All items were donated to Sojourner Family Peace Center. Nine boxes of winter wear were also donated to Under the Bridge. Under the Bridge is a non-profit company dedicated to helping the homeless of Milwaukee.

Scott Ottesen, transition patient advocate, worked with Toys for Tots for the fourth year in a row. The 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines Fox Company out of Milwaukee came to the hospital December 17 and dropped off toys for more than 40 children of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.

"I've always been involved with Toys for Tots. I decided to try it here with our team, and it's been a huge success," said Ottesen.

The team identified the Veterans who were the most in need, and this year each child will receive seven gifts.

"The Veterans are just floored by it. Amazed that we even asked them about it," Ottesen said. "They're just speechless."

Another member of the Iraq and Afghanistan team, Al Hanley, worked with Nation of Patriots and provided seven Veterans with a substantial monetary gift. Nation of Patriots is a non-profit organization that raises financial support for the families of American wounded Veterans through a national movement called the Patriot Tour.

"It saves the holiday for these Veterans and their children," said Hanley. "Instead of worrying about deciding to pay rent or buy gifts for their kids, they now can do both."

Photo by Jessica Serdynski

More than 60 students from the Story School visited the Milwaukee VA to sing classic holiday tunes Dec. 18 for Veterans and staff of the Milwaukee VA.

Holiday Concert brings cheer to Veterans and staff of Milwaukee VA

By Antony Kamps

Story School students filled the Matousek Auditorium with classic holiday tunes Dec.18 for Veterans and staff of the Milwaukee VA.

The holiday concert was planned by Jessica Serdynski from Voluntary Services. She said she hoped the smiling children's faces and their songs would brighten the day of everyone who attended.

"Not only is it important for the Veterans to have the interaction and happy atmosphere of having children around for therapeutic reasons," said Serdynski, "it put a huge smile on my face, as I am sure it did other staff that were there and brought back memories of my daughter and son when they were little. It put me in the holiday spirit."

The children dressed the part wearing red and white Santa Claus hats. Some children wore lit up red noses, mimicking Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. One boy went full Santa Claus with the hat and white beard.

The audience showed their enthusiasm by singing along with the children and applauding after each song. Chris Alberti, program manager of My HealtheVet, said the children sang beautifully.

"It was so nice of them to come in and sing for us," said Alberti. "And you know they practiced their little hearts out and it was just a great performance."

All of them had a smile from ear to ear as they sang classic holiday tunes such as, "Jingle Bells," "Deck the Halls," and "Frosty the Snowman. " The children sang a total of six songs. After the performance, the children handed each audience member a handmade Christmas card.

The scribe on one card read: "We wish you a wonderful holiday to all of you. Thank You for fighting for us. Have a wonderful Christmas and happy holiday. Thank you for saving my family and everybody. From, Tashaunna. Story School."

Will Johnson, EEO specialist, stood up and thanked the children on behalf of everyone in attendance.

"You have no idea how important it is to us for you to come here. You give us our first present of Christmas. Where ever you go it's just magic. So, thank you."

Happy Holidays

Photo by Kathy Cook

In and Around the Milwaukee VA

Starting clockwise from top: Bobby Lee Fleener (left) gets an unexpected visit from Kris Kringle himself Dec. 10. as volunteers, and the 128th Air Refueling Wing distributed more than 500 gift bags to Veterans throughout the Milwaukee VA. Amber, the Elf on a Shelf, made her way across the Milwaukee VA in the weeks leading up to the holidays. One of her stops was inside the Women's Clothing Clinic. Members of Wisconsin Wing Civil Air Patrol ready wreaths for National Wreaths Across America Day at Wood National Cemetery Dec. 13. A Milwaukee VA holiday tradition continued Dec. 12, as the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra played for Veterans and staff inside the Recreation Hall at the hospital.

Photo by Gary J. Kunich

Photo by Benjamin Slane

Photo by Benjamin Slane