

Veterans Rounding at Hospital Provides Needed Connection & Comfort for Patients

BY REBECCA GUMMERE, PHOTOS COURTESY OF NOVANT HEALTH



Pictured (Left to Right) Suzanne Sawyer, Volunteer Coordinator for NH Pender Medical Center; Bob Young, volunteer; Dave Stevens, volunteer; Jose Montes Gonzales, volunteer; Anne Grinnell, volunteer; Gerry Burns, volunteer; Anne Wilbourne, volunteer; Carl Farmer, volunteer; Kapica Davis, Volunteer Coordinator for NH NHRMC

Since 2022, volunteers at Novant Health New Hanover Regional Medical Center (NHRMC) have visited over 4,500 hospitalized Veterans. Four regular volunteers and seven additional substitute volunteers are what makes this extraordinary program so effective, shares Kapica Davis, volunteer coordinator. Volunteers have called on a wide variety of those who have served our country, Davis says, “from reservists to Coast Guard to even, by accident, a British Royal Navy Retiree.”

One of the regular volunteers at the hospital, Frank Weisgerber, has been part of the Veterans Rounding program since its inception two years ago. He and teammate Gerry Burns make rounds every Monday. “We visit all the Veterans in the hospital that day, bring a little card and thank them for their service. Just meeting with them, they’re very appreciative that people care that they are Veterans.” The men will visit as many as 25 inpatient Veterans in a day.

Kapica shares, “We’ve called on those who served in World War II all the way up to active duty. You can imagine the range of emotions. Often there are tears. One Veteran told Frank and Gerry that no one had ever thanked him before.”



Veterans Frank Weisgerber and Gerry Burns are hospital volunteers who enjoy their Monday rounds together.

Frank Weisgerber served six years in the U.S. Navy. For two of those years, during the Vietnam War he was stationed in the Mediterranean. "I was happy when I was in the service," he shares. "To me it was a privilege. I have a family of vets. My brothers are all Army and Marine Corps." Volunteerism is a way of life for Frank who in 2023 was awarded the President's Lifetime Achievement Award for attaining 4,000 hours of volunteer service.

Gerry Burns's father was a World War II Veteran who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was awarded the Bronze Star. Burns attributes his draw to volunteerism to his mother. "She was always volunteering at church, a busy woman with five kids. When I came home from college once she had me paint her girlfriend's living room because she'd lost her husband.

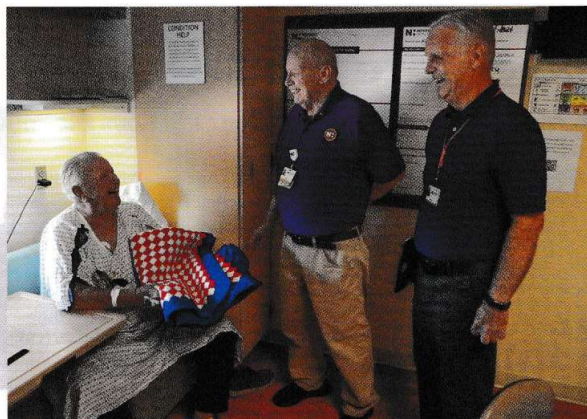
"I was a heart patient during COVID," Burns says. "I took time off from my volunteer work at the hospital and came back to transport people out of the surgical pavilion. I met Kapica. She's very impressive and persuasive," he says. "I learn something every visit," Burns shares, adding he is "soulfully enriched" by the visits.

Both men say they look forward to Mondays when they make their rounds. "My partner Gerry and I, we work well together. We feed off each other," says Frank.

"Many times, the family is in the room with them, and we walk into the room and there's a cloud of great concern for their well-being," shares Gerry. "We spend time listening and tell a joke to brighten things up, and oftentimes that works. We never know what we're going to encounter," he says. "Some don't want to talk at all. We try not to impose ourselves."

A Day of Honor and Tribute

The team of Veterans Rounding volunteers routinely call on hospitalized Veterans whenever the need arises. On two very special days, Veterans Day and July Fourth, veterans receive a special visit. "The New Hanover



Frank and Gerry deliver a red, white and blue blanket to an inpatient Veteran.

Senior Resource Center has a group of talented retirees called The GRADS (Gifted Retired Active Dedicated Seniors)," shares Davis. "They crochet or knit lap blankets in red, white and blue, enough to bring on Veterans Day and July Fourth. We call on those holidays to the Vets that are inpatient.

"Our nurses do such a great job of knowing what's going on when rounding on Veterans Day," Davis continues. She shares the story of a nurse asking one of the volunteers if there was time to call on a woman who was not a Veteran. Upon learning that the patient was a Gold Star mother, the volunteer felt privileged to spend time and hear her deeply moving story.

If you are interested in becoming part of the volunteer network at Novant Health, go to novanthealth.org/get-connected/volunteer for more information.