

During Nurses Week, a shy nurse steps forward as 'Mother of the Ventilator Program'

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Nurse Linda Dittman works with residents on ventilators at Sunshine Communities for the developmentally disabled on May 6 in Maumee. Described internally as “the mother of the ventilator program,” for 48 years “Ms. Linda” has cared for the Sunshine community.

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For nearly half a century, Linda Dittman has been the quiet heartbeat of Sunshine Communities.

The nurse has walked the halls doing the relentless work of keeping people alive — something she knew early on was her calling.

“I’ve always wanted to be a nurse. About seventh grade, I decided, and then just went from there,” she said.

She started in a nursing home at age 16, then joined Sunshine — and never left.

For more than 75 years, the Maumee-based community has supported people with developmental disabilities with a range of clinical services on its 25-acre campus.

“At the very beginning, we had hardly any medical equipment at all,” Ms. Dittman said. “We had one tank of oxygen for the whole building, and it was being shared with the patients.”

Over the years, she became known inside Sunshine as “the mother of the ventilators,” a nickname she wears lightly but has more than earned.

She was there when Ohio first began formal ventilator programs and helped the center build its own from the ground up, working directly with state officials in Columbus to navigate the paperwork and expectations.

Ventilators provide life-saving respiratory support in a homelike setting, allowing patients with complex medical needs to live more independently and comfortably.

“It started with the state only giving extra help for the pediatric ventilators, so we only had one at that time,” Ms. Dittman said. “And then pretty soon they added the adult ventilators ... and then slowly we just kept receiving more and more applicants for ventilators, and we are up to 19 now.”

Joe Kelso, director of nursing at Sunshine, credits Ms. Dittman with both shaping the ventilator program and drawing people to it. He described her as a steady presence the whole system quietly leans on.

“When we have talent like her, and we get more people to come here, that means that we have to support more people,” he said.

While the work of a nurse providing critical care requires giving of herself, Ms. Dittman said the exchange is never one-sided.

“They give me so much,” she said of her patients. “They all have a different personality and you can talk, and they respond. It’s good to help them [but] I get a lot from them.”

That spirit of mutual care runs through the entire Sunshine community.

“It’s a special place,” Mr. Kelso said. “To Linda’s point, it’s all about the relationships. You don’t get that in a normal nursing job; you get to know so many people through their lifespan. Our youngest [resident] is 1; our oldest is 80-something.”

While leadership has to keep an eye on finances, Ms. Dittman said her own compass has always pointed firmly toward the residents and their care.

“I will always be there for the residents,” she said. “I’ve always just worked here for them.”

She now works part time, but she remains embedded in the most complex care.

“I accompany all of the individuals that have a [tracheostomy tube] and/or a vent to all of their doctor’s appointments, hospitals for surgeries because they have to have a nurse,” she said.

Her impact is as emotional as it is clinical, seen most clearly in her story about Faith, a medically fragile baby with no stable parents and serious health challenges whom Ms. Dittman grew deeply attached to.

“She became mine,” she said. “We did everything with her. I took her home for the day on a vent.”

Faith lived 13 months. After she died, Ms. Dittman gathered the baby’s clothes, cut them into heart shapes, and stitched them into a quilt.

“It’s hanging up at St. V’s right now,” she said of Mercy Health St. Vincent Medical Center. “They said they’ll never take it down.”

Sarah Louviere, a nurse at the center for nine years, said Ms. Dittman’s example shaped how she approaches every patient and she reveres her as the calm, dependable foundation of their team.

“New on the job, she was always right there to answer questions. She said, ‘Call me any time of day. It doesn’t matter,’ and she would do that with all of our nurses,” she said. “We could call her in the middle of the night, and she would answer.”

Now 73, with no retirement in sight, Ms. Dittman marks National Nurses Week with 48 years at Sunshine, a tenure that’s made her the backbone of its ventilator program and, in many ways, its heart.

“You have to find your own niche; you have to find out where you’re happy,” she said. “And I have always been happy here.”