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Long-time hospital employees honored

ROME – According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker will switch jobs 7-10 times during their working lives. When Mary Lou Wilson and Donald Allen decide to retire, Rome Memorial Hospital will have been the only place of employment they have ever known.

Wilson, a licensed practical nurse in the Employee Health Department, has devoted more than 45 years of service to the hospital, and Allen, a nurse assistant, has been a loyal employee for more than 40 years. They each received “years of service” pins during National Hospital Week in recognition of their commitment to Rome Memorial Hospital.



Rome Memorial Hospital President/Chief Executive Officer Basil J. Ariglio, center, presents years of service pins to Mary Lou Wilson, left, a licensed practical nurse in the employee health department and Donald Allen, a nurse assistant. Wilson received her pin for her 45 years of service at the hospital, while Allen was recognized for his 40 years of service.

When Wilson was hired, Lyndon Johnson was president, “Mary Poppins” had just won five Oscar awards and the first American soldiers were being sent to Vietnam. Fresh out of nursing school when she began her career at the hospital, she has worked in several departments during her tenure.

“I worked on the fourth floor for a couple of years until I had to cover a shift in the emergency department when someone called in sick,” she recalls. “I liked the work in the E.D. so much that I never went back.”

Wilson remained there for the next 38 years, actually witnessing four different incarnations of the emergency department, the latest coming in 2006. She notes that numerous changes in technology have made a huge difference for patients and nurses alike.

“When I started, we had beds that had to be raised and lowered manually using a crank, metal bed pans and glass thermometers,” Wilson said. “Today, everything is electronic, even temperatures are taken with an electronic ear thermometer.”

Approximately six years ago, Wilson began working in the Employee Health Department where she has remained ever since. She is now responsible for caring for the caregivers, giving help

when any of the more than 1000 hospital employees falls ill on the job. She also helps keep employees and patients healthy by ensuring that employees receive their annual immunizations.

Technology is not the only thing that Wilson has seen change. “I can remember when a trip to the emergency room cost \$3.75,” Wilson said. “The E.D. at the time had two rooms and only one stretcher that had wheels on it. There were no separate charges. At the end of the day, the patient took their slip to the cashier and paid.”

Allen began his career at Rome Memorial Hospital in 1970. As a nurse assistant, he is charged with numerous patient-related responsibilities including everything from taking vital signs and monitoring patients to assisting patients with bathing, dressing and feeding. “I started here when I was 19, basically right out of high school,” Allen said.

He credits the challenges of the job and changes in both technology and patients with keeping things interesting for the past 40-plus years. “The job is both rewarding and extremely challenging,” he said. “The technology today is really incredible. I can remember old steam vaporizers and oxygen tanks that had to be placed in the rooms. With the way everything is streamlined today, from machines and equipment to the electronic health records, it is almost an entirely different place.”

Having been with the same organization for such a long time has made him a fixture, both in the hospital and in the community.

“It seems like the longer you’ve been here, the harder it is to leave,” Allen explained. “I run into people all the time who recognize me from their time at the hospital as far back as the 1970s. It’s kind of special when someone you took care of 25 years ago still recognizes you. It lets you know that you have left a lasting impression on that person and have touched their lives.”

“I think that nursing and helping people is something that I was destined to do,” Allen continued. “It’s the only thing I’ve ever done and I am grateful to have the opportunity to do something I love and enjoy for more than 40 years.”

Of all the benefits that Allen has received from his years at Rome Memorial Hospital, perhaps the greatest was meeting his wife of 11 years, Carolyn, a registered nurse who has been at the hospital for over 32 years.

“We worked together on the same floor for quite a long time,” he said. “Over the years, we got to be close and in 1999 we were married.”

Both Wilson and Allen agree that there is a strong sense of family that runs through the halls of the hospital, making it a special place to work. “I came in and the people just adopted me and I adopted them and I’ve been here ever since,” Wilson said. “It’s just a great group of people, they’re my family. I have been blessed to be able to help so many people, both patients and co-workers. That alone has made coming here for the past 45 years an absolute pleasure.”

Both acknowledge the prospect of retirement in the future is something they will have to face. “I am looking forward to my retirement,” Allen said. “Carolyn and I plan to retire in July of 2013.

Between the two of us, we'll have 77 years of nursing experience when we leave. We both love what we do, but we also have a lot to look forward to outside the hospital."

"I think about retirement sometimes," Wilson said. "But whenever it comes up I seem to get wrapped up into a different project and by the time I consider it again, another year has gone by."

One such project, the Angel Fund closet and food pantry, is something Wilson is especially proud of. The project began years ago when Wilson noticed that some of her co-workers were having a hard time making ends meet. For years behind the scenes, she did what she could to help, offering assistance out of her own pocket.

When the hospital's administration learned of Wilson's generosity, formal steps were taken to designate funds for a new program and the Angel Fund was born. Last year, more than 400 members of the hospital family received some form of assistance from the Angel Fund, which is now funded through donations, raffles and denim days.

"One of the things which really adds to the sense of family that is present throughout this organization is the generosity that I have seen displayed through the Angel Fund," Wilson said. "If there is a need for something, whether it is money or school supplies, I only need to ask once and the need is filled. With the way the economy is, there are a lot of people who just need a little help to get them over the hump. The Angel Fund provides just that."

While Wilson isn't quite ready to put an exact date on her retirement, she knows it may be sooner than later. "I've always wanted to do some travelling," she says with a smile. "I think 46 years is a good stretch. Maybe sometime in the next year or so, I may just decide that it is time to get out and do some of that travelling."