Volunteer Bob Kruse has found his niche as a volunteer at Mercyhealth Hospital–Rockton Avenue.

For the more than 300 people who volunteer at Mercyhealth Hospital–Rockton Avenue, giving their time is more than just something they do — it’s their calling. Whether they participate in the pet therapy program, volunteer in the gift shop, transport patients around the hospital, or cuddle premature babies, they find tremendous satisfaction in giving back to their community. The following are just a few of the many dedicated volunteers who are vital to Mercyhealth’s success.
Marcia Donaldson had always wanted to participate in a pet therapy program, but none of her previous dogs had the right personality for the job. Then, three years ago, Bella and Blue came into her home — two bearded collies whom she knew would be perfect companions to patients in the hospital. Marcia enrolled them in obedience courses when they were puppies, and two years ago, they became certified as therapy dogs through Therapy Dogs International. They signed on as volunteers with Mercyhealth Hospital–Rockton Avenue’s Loving Tails Pet Therapy Program.

Now, Marcia brings one of her two dogs to the hospital every Friday to visit children on the pediatric floor and patients at the Mercyhealth Cancer Center. Nurses and other caregivers ask parents and patients ahead of time if they would like a visit from a dog, and if they’re interested, either Bella or Blue steps in for a cuddle. “It is a way of focusing the patients’ minds on positives, on caring, on something they associate with comfort,” Marcia says. “From a physical standpoint, animal therapy lowers blood pressure, decreases anxiety and increases endorphins in patients’ bodies.” Marcia remembers one particular situation when a child was near death in Mercyhealth’s Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. The child was not conscious, but Marcia and Blue sat with her family. “The mother looked into Blue’s eyes and told him all about her daughter,” she says. “Blue was so attentive and just looked into her face and licked her hand. It was a wonderful experience.”

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Four years ago, Jen Quintas was a shy Guilford High School student who was afraid to speak because she sometimes stuttered. At her mother’s suggestion, she began looking for a volunteer position, and found one at the Mercyhealth Hospital–Rockton Avenue Auxiliary Gift Shop. Now she’s a 19-year-old nursing student at Rockford University — and she’s still volunteering at the gift shop. “I just love it,” she says. “I get to interact with so many different kinds of people.”

As a gift shop volunteer, Jen helps customers find the perfect item for their loved ones, rings up their purchases, and wraps their items when requested. The position is perfect for her, she says, because she has the opportunity to make people happy. Over the past four years, it has helped her come out of her shell. Even though she’s a full-time student who plays volleyball and works two part-time jobs, she has stuck with it because she likes to keep busy.

It was her job at the gift shop that helped Jen decide she wanted to become a nursing student. She plans on earning her degree in nursing, and then deciding if she wants to become a nurse practitioner or a doctor. “I really want to help people,” she says.

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Bob Kruse spent 35 years running his own business, and when he retired, he knew he wanted to stay active. He and his wife Carole found their niche as volunteers at Mercyhealth Hospital–Rockton Avenue. “My wife had two children at the hospital, and we had a very good experience there,” he says. “We wanted to give something back.”

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Mercyhealth’s Rockton Avenue Campus honored its dedicated volunteers at an annual luncheon in November.

The benefit goes both ways: Bob and Carole have made some very good friends during their years volunteering at the hospital. And they get plenty of exercise. Bob figures that on a busy day, he probably walks a couple miles while he’s wheeling patients around the hospital. “Every day we have people who are really friendly and glad to have us taking them,” he says. “We really enjoy volunteering at Mercyhealth.”

In January 2019, Mercyhealth will open a brand-new hospital at the intersection of I-90 and E. Riverside Blvd. The new facility will be in great need of volunteers in the areas highlighted above and in the following positions:

Visitor Information Desk — Volunteers welcome patients and visitors, assist with patient room information, give directions and escort people around the hospital.

Emergency Trauma Center — Volunteers assist nursing staff with non-clinical tasks in a very fast-paced environment. A few of the tasks include checking and stocking supplies, obtaining warm blankets for patients, cleaning patient rooms after a patient is discharged, and other tasks as needed.

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While other volunteers spend their time walking the halls of the hospital or regularly interacting with patients and guests, Sandy Scott’s volunteer time is much quieter. Her job is to focus on just one person: the baby she is cuddling. Sandy volunteers for the Mercyhealth 52-bed Level III (highest level) Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) holding high-risk babies during the hours their parents are unable to be present. Studies have shown that premature infants benefit from being held, which is why Mercyhealth has a stable of volunteers who are ready and willing to cuddle them. "I feel it is very important to give all babies a healthy start in life," says Sandy. "Every baby needs to be held, to feel safe and secure, to be cuddled and rocked. My goal is to allow the baby to rest comfortably and feel loved so he or she can grow and develop, ultimately leaving the hospital to arrive home with its own family."

Sandy began volunteering in Mercyhealth’s Level III NICU after retiring from her job in the transcription department at University of Illinois College of Medicine in Rockford. All her life, she has volunteered in a variety of areas. When she retired, she wanted to spend her time doing what she loves — interacting with babies. There is a long waiting list for the “cuddler” volunteer position, and Sandy spent a year and a half on the waiting list before being called to the plate. "The screening was probably more involved than any job I’ve had in my life," she says. “But it was all worth it. I always look forward to the days when I am scheduled to volunteer with these very special little people. I will continue this volunteer job as long as I am physically able to cuddle and rock babies!”