

Volunteerism, a beautiful compensation of life

American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: “It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life, that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.” Emerson and John Gutknecht share a similar philosophy when it comes to volunteerism – the virtue of giving flows both ways.

A Mercy Medical volunteer, Gutknecht says that storytelling at Carroll Place to a room full of residents every Monday brings him as much joy and heartfelt delight as it does his audience. And every Wednesday, Gutknecht sings and dances for patients and families with the Sing-Along Choir at Mercy’s main facility in Daphne.

Storytelling, mentoring and teaching come naturally to Gutknecht, a retired Georgia Southern University professor. Gutknecht said he spends significant time selecting his materials as he did before retirement, not just to entertain, but also to inspire and move his friends. And though the faces of his audiences have changed, the drive and inspiration may be even greater since there is no monetary compensation. Now his motivation is

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— Ralph Waldo Emerson

solely spirited by the pure enjoyment he receives every time he sees smiles, laughter or tears from his sincere listeners.

“When retiring, the decision of how to use the sudden abundance of available time becomes a major consideration,” Gutknecht explained. “Some can’t handle the transition resulting in emotional problems. Others find pleasure in a well-stroked tennis ball, or a long drive down a golf fairway, or perhaps a ‘grand slam’ at the bridge table. Others volunteer as a



In 1987, the Sing-Along Choir began and has consistently entertained residents and patients every week at Mercy Medical. Their dedication is admired and appreciated by all. From left to right: Mae Myrick, John Gutknecht, Marion McKnight, Anh Kangsumrith, Margaret Guenther, Rachel Thomas, Jeane Bodden, and Peggy Copeland.

supplement to their activities. They find, as I do, that the rewards in serving others enrich all other activities, resulting in a much more meaningful and satisfying retirement.”

Gutknecht also volunteers in Mercy’s hospice program, at Thomas Hospital, Homestead Village, St. Lawrence Catholic Church, and for the Service Corps of Retired Executives

(SCORE). His work at the hospital hospice volunteer, leading him to even more diverse volunteer opportunities.

“While making my rounds as a hospice volunteer at Mercy, I heard the sound of music, a piano and the rich voices of ladies singing songs from the past, entertaining a group of appreciative patients who were smiling, clapping and singing along. On impulse I asked if they could use another voice. Their welcome

aboard led to one of the most satisfying assignments I’ve had as a volunteer,” said Gutknecht. “The power of music is recognized as a calming agent and an antidote for stress and tensions for patients. It’s a blessing for the volunteers who can feel the presence of the Spirit as we join our audience in song.”

Gutknecht is one of several career professors currently volunteering at Mercy, according to Judy Hazelton, Mercy’s volunteer manager. “John’s zeal is contagious,” she said. “He lifts the spirits not only of the residents, patients and families, but he energizes the employees of Mercy Medical with his enthusiasm. Watching him interact with others is truly entertainment in itself. We love him here.”

When applying for a volunteer opportunity at Mercy, Gutknecht wrote, “I’m looking for service work to complement my existing volunteer activities.” Really, Gutknecht’s volunteer activities complement Mercy in a special way. He tells stories, listens, sings, dances and sincerely cares for people and, in return, he is compensated with abilities to make life beautiful. – CKM 