

Sr. Marlene Panko Offers a Helping Hand

**CELEBRATING
OUR COLLEAGUES
WHO CONTINUE
THE MISSION**

BY GABRIEL KILEY

Mr. Kiley is managing editor, Health Progress, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

Editor's Note: This new department shares the stories of Catholic health care professionals "going above and beyond" to fulfill their organization's mission.

Sister Marlene Panko, SSND, offers a helping hand to those in need — literally. Every Wednesday, the chaplain at Holy Family Medical Center in Des Plaines, Ill., in suburban Chicago, finds a quiet place for employees to visit and spend a few minutes to experience her healing touch and soothing words. Under the backdrop of soft, instrumental music, Sr. Panko provides a hand massage and engages them in conversation and prayer. After her blessing, an employee chooses a half-dollar-sized stone with a hand-written inspirational word or phrase.

"I wanted a program that would not take away

time from [the employees'] jobs," said Sr. Panko, who started the Loving Heart, Healing Hands program three years ago. "Soft music and touch, in my mind, are healing qualities. That's an important part of this program. It just takes 3 to 5 minutes for this experience. That is what captivated the staff. They don't have to miss out on their responsibilities, and they get a lift to help them get back to their work. You can see the peace and relaxation coming over them as I massage their hands."

The program is part of Resurrection Health Care's Spiritual Services department, which includes more than 100 chaplains. The Chicago-based health system, which has more than 100 locations with 14,000 employees, is sponsored by Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth and the Sisters of the Resurrection.

Holy Family Medical Center, a long-term acute care hospital, was founded in 1961. The staff specializes in providing care for critically ill patients who must be hospitalized for an extended period.

"At Holy Family, we respect the integration of mind, body and spirit. This program really tries to do that," Sr. Panko said.

Sr. Panko started the hand massage service 10 years ago during a previous stint as a chaplain at Saint John's Health Center in Santa Monica, Calif. She continued the service when she joined Holy Family in 2005.

"As a chaplain, I see myself being available to patients, families and staff members," Sr. Panko said. "I have many opportunities to work with patients and families, but my heart goes out to the employees and doctors and nurses. They work hard and carry heavy responsibilities. They deal with life-and-death situations every day. This weighs heavily on the staff. The helpers need help, too."

Employees enjoy the benefits of regular visits with Sr. Panko.

"I firmly believe in the power of prayer," said Eleni Harris, a psych intern-therapist. "Praying with Sr. Marlene has provided me with a sense of inner peace, clarity, strength and acceptance. I have witnessed miracles in both my personal and professional life. She truly touches and inspires all who come in contact with her."



Eric Herzog

Sister Marlene Panko, SSND, (right) meets with an employee at Holy Family Medical Center in suburban Chicago and engages her with prayer and hand massages.

Another employee, Georgia Filipatos, works in the substance abuse department. She started attending the sessions with Sr. Panko two years ago.

"When she is here, everything is peaceful," Filipatos said. "It's just relaxing, and if something is bothering you during the day, I'm able to pray through my concerns. We know God is there with us."

Sr. Panko views her current roles at Holy Family as a natural extension of her long career, which includes stints as a teacher, a director of religious education, a vicar for religious in the Diocese of La Crosse, Wis., and various capacities with the School Sisters of Notre Dame. In the 1990s, she decided that chaplaincy was her "calling."

"Once an educator, always an educator," she said of her career. "I see that as my focus, as a way to help people reach their potential."

In preparation, Sr. Panko took lessons from a certified massage therapist, and attended several related courses. "I couldn't believe that massaging hands can relax the whole body, but it does," she said.

Employees are not the only ones benefiting from the hand-massage program. Sr. Panko offers her services for one hour every Thursday for the hospital's Keys to Recovery, an inpatient alcoholism and drug treatment center. She meets up to 30 patients per week.

"[The patients] are so ready to put their concerns before God in the presence of another," she said. "You can see the relief in the people when they are able to relax and share their concerns. It can change their lives. They often share deep, personal things, and when I articulate them in a prayer, so often the tears will come. I always have a box of Kleenex in the room. It's amazing to see, after the tears come and I embrace them, it's like something has been lifted from their shoulders."

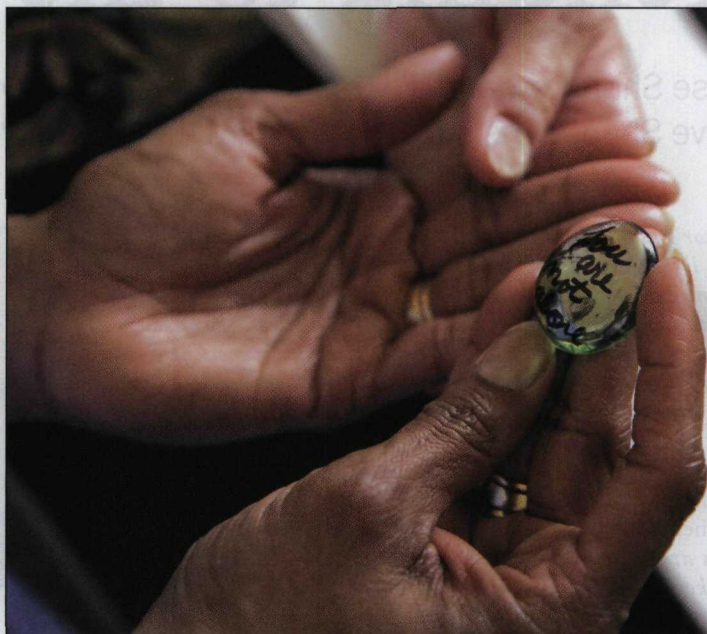
All of Sr. Panko's patients receive a colored stone with comforting words, such as "courage," "you are not alone" and "guide me."

"So often, what [the patients] have prayed for and what I've prayed for them is related to the stone they picked," she said.

The best part of the job, she said, is "seeing the expression of peace and relaxation come over a person after they share something deep from

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Sr. Panko gives visitors a colored stone with words of encouragement.

their heart. It's therapeutic. I feel that I am an instrument of God to facilitate this process."

Even with the joys of the job, Sr. Panko admits that hearing the day-to-day troubles that employees share with her can be challenging to address at times. Even so, sometimes sad stories have a happy ending.

"One of the nicest joys for me was this couple that wanted to have a baby but were having trouble," she said. "Sure enough, they were finally able to have a baby, and they brought the baby to me to bless. That was a delight for me."

Sr. Panko's helping hand to those in need is a way to "sense the presence of God," she said.

"If there is a Scripture that says it all, it's from Psalm 46:11, 'Be still and know that I am God,'" she said. "I see the person with heavy shoulders and once they relax and get into the prayer, I sense a moment of quiet there. It's pretty amazing." ■



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