

'The Most GRATIFYING THING'

By advocating for her patients, Sister Mary Rosaleen Driscoll follows her beliefs and gains 'better insight' into her own life

Every weekday morning Sister Mary Rosaleen Driscoll, from the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, dons her signature white clothing, white hat and white Oxford shoes. On her white jacket, she affixes a coat-of-arms pin from her order, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, and the Providence

Medical Center nursing school pin she got in 1952 when she received her diploma. She puts on a ring her nephew made for her in honor of her 25th year of religious life that incorporates artistic symbols for the things that guide her on a daily basis: poverty, service, chastity, obedience, the Holy Family and the Holy Spirit. Simply adorned, she prays for an hour, attends Mass, then prays a little while longer in the Marian Clinic chapel before her team opens the doors at 8 a.m. to meet the medical needs of the uninsured.

"Every morning I always ask, 'What are we going to do today, Lord?'" says the woman who prefers to be called simply "Sister." At 82, her energy, enthusiasm and sense of fun have captivated patients, health care professionals and donors through two decades of dedicated service to the clinic.

Sister joined the Marian Clinic shortly after it was established in 1988 by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth through a collaboration with St. Francis Health Center. With nursing licenses and an extensive administrative background, she came to Topeka at the request of Sister Concepta Monk, then the nursing administrator.

"In those early years I mopped floors and got charts ready," recalls Sister. "We did a lot of physicals for students and workers and treated a lot of sore throats."



Sister Mary Rosaleen Driscoll

Today more than 5,200 regional patients seek treatment each year for a variety of conditions from heart ailments and neurosurgical needs to diabetes concerns and respiratory difficulties. Whatever their circumstances, patients who come to the Marian Clinic receive care to restore their health through a collaborative network of providers, including one full-time physician and one part-time physician on staff. Through the support of St. Francis Health Center, Stormont-Vail HealthCare and more than 220 volunteer nurses and physicians specializing in internal medicine, family medicine, podiatry, cardiology and many other fields, patients are treated

THE MAKING OF A SISTER

Growing up as the sixth of 10 kids on a Fruitland, Idaho, farm, Sister Mary Rosaleen Driscoll says she learned to be resourceful and resilient in a "loving" family that fortified itself with prayer when hail, drought or other natural elements threatened. "Instead of making us quit, the hardships and prayer strengthened us," says Sister.

Sister's career has included completing a bachelor's degree in nursing and postgraduate work in pediatrics and working at hospitals in Colorado, Kansas, Montana and New Mexico. She took care of neonatal patients at St. Joseph's Hospital in Denver before going to the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Mother House to care for aging sisters in Ross Hall.

"I went from taking care of babies to taking care of 99-year-olds," says Sister. "Then I came here to the Marian Clinic. I've met a lot of wonderful people here, the patients, the staff, the doctors, the donors. The volunteers especially are the wind beneath my sails because we couldn't do what we do without them."

In between her travels for work through the years, she's also made religious pilgrimages to Lourdes, Medjugorje, Italy and Croatia and taken trips to Ireland and other destinations with friends and family for rest and rejuvenation.

"The Lord's been good to me," she says matter-of-factly. "I didn't want an ordinary life, and I haven't had one. I'm eager to see what he's got in store for me next."



on site or through consultations arranged by Marian Clinic staff.

Located at 1001 S.W. Garfield, the clinic has continued to expand its physical space as well as its medical capabilities, including assistance with surgical procedures, mental health, social work support and the addition of a dental clinic.

"Often we're the very last place our patients can go, and it's important for us to defend our patients and get them what they need," says Sister, who serves as a patient advocate and works closely with a social worker to help with patients who have complicated care needs. "We see a lot of mental illness, too, since the state hospital closed and the Menninger Clinic left. They can't afford medications. But if we can get them their medications, then they can become compliant with their care for diabetes, hypertension or whatever they're struggling with."

The hours are long and the needs daunting, but Sister's faith and feistiness enable her to prevail. "I've learned through the years that if I don't stand up for these patients, who will? If I don't stick up for them, particularly if they have a complicated condition, who will? For this, I get in trouble sometimes—my mouth has always gotten me in trouble—but it's OK as long as I don't get in trouble up there," she says with a grin, pointing her finger heavenward.

That detached view of her own earthly fate is echoed in how Sister describes the cancer diagnosis she received a year ago, which she perceives as an opportunity to receive "better insight so I can be more compassionate with my patients."

Relying on Mother Teresa as a role model, Sister embodies the saint's attributes of tenderness and tenacity as she strives to "go the extra mile, spend the extra minutes, find out what's really going on" and often gets



Inspired by her faith, Sister has dedicated her life to providing others with medical care.

to witness the transformation of patients whose overall well-being has been restored, not just a physical ailment fixed.

"We've had some difficult patients come in here who wouldn't make eye contact with us or they seemed disinterested in their care because they've been told 'no' so many times before. But we kept at it because no person is beyond help, and that's what Mother Teresa did. She took that extra step," says Sister. "We've had patients come back to see us we didn't even recognize because their transformations were so complete."

Follow-up visits to express gratitude are commonplace, including one frequent visitor who underwent the first surgical procedure the clinic arranged.

"He's Vietnamese, and he always comes by at Christmas to pay his respects. I always say, 'God bless you,' and he reminds me he's a Buddhist and then we laugh," says Sister.

It's this ability to establish connection that sustains Sister. "The most gratifying thing is to each day know that I have helped someone who was really needy, to spend the day with people who are less fortunate and give them what little I can, a prayer or a smile or to just let them know they are loved," she says. IM