Earning Their Stripes

Teen hospital volunteers take on more demanding roles

By Frank Brieaddy
Staff writer

Teen hospital volunteers used to be called “candy stripers.” Almost all were girls who wore pink-and-white-striped dresses and performed only limited tasks for patients.

That era faded away years ago.

Today’s teen volunteers do such tasks as preparing, cleaning and restocking one-day surgical suites, transporting blood and handling tiny babies in the pediatrics unit.

Nicole Clarke, 17, and going into her senior year at Henninger High School, didn’t hesitate for a second to pick up 6-month-old Aver Cortright-Shedd, of Binghamton, Thursday afternoon on her first day in pediatrics at Crouse Hospital.

The baby was being treated for a nutritional disorder diagnosed at birth.

Clarke didn’t mind her assignment to entertain the infant, explaining that she was 13 when her younger sister was born and is accustomed to holding babies.

Clarke, in her second year as a Crouse volunteer, is also familiar with hospital procedures.

Earlier in the day, a young male volunteer put together the automatic fish feeder for the pediatric unit’s aquarium. Later he sorted, labeled and delivered diapers around the department.

“We find they’re very flexible,” said Cathy Woods, a registered nurse in charge of the unit on the day shift.

The work the teen volunteers do would normally have to be done by nurses or nurses’ aides, taking them away from more complex tasks for which they were trained.

The volunteers also are a far cry from the “candy stripers” of old, said Richard Scott, director of Crouse’s teen volunteers. “I think the big difference is how much more sophisticated tasks they’re asked to perform,” he said.

Crouse has 90 teens working this summer, second in Syracuse only to St. Joseph’s Hospital Health Center, which has 140.

Many volunteers still perform traditional patient service tasks, which at Crouse are part of a program called Favors. They’ll get a snack for patients, visitors or staff, make purchases in the gift shop, fetch newspapers or write letters.

Clarke said she prefers more time with patients.

“I like being in the room with the patients,” she said. “With Favors, you’re up and down (the elevator) a lot.”

She said she also has worked in labor and delivery (she notes she was born at Crouse) and the hospital’s human resources department, all of which reinforces her education in Henninger’s health careers program.

She’s among the one-third of the Crouse volunteers who also hold down a paying job. She works at Wegmans on James Street.

Will she end up in health care?

“I’m keeping my options open,” she said, noting that she’ll soon visit Cornell University to participate in a program to explore business education.

Scott said all of the teens receive a 10-hour orientation to hospital procedures and further training for specific tasks. Because they are prepared to do more, they are valued more than teen volunteers of a decade or two ago.

That’s particularly valuable in pediatrics, which has its share of toddlers in need of attention.

“A lot of times, they can occupy a 2-year-old so you can go and do something else,” said Woods, the pediatrics supervisor.