

Marjorie Brewster has volunteered at Southlake for 25 years—most of that time working with children and their families, including patients of the paediatric oncology clinic.

Jim Craigmyle photograph



All you need is *Love*

Longtime volunteer has special bond with children, parents

by Sue Kanhai

On Dec. 9, anyone with an ounce of good sense would have known to wish Marjorie Brewster a happy 29th birthday.

"You're only as old as you feel," says the 84-year-old Newmarket resident.

A natural storyteller blessed with a sharp memory, wicked sense of humour and boundless energy, Mrs. Brewster has volunteered at Southlake for the past 25 years. Most of that time, she worked in paediatrics and she currently volunteers with the paediatric oncology clinic. She can be found on the floor with "her" kids four days a week.

Mrs. Brewster insists every child has a little gift to look forward to on every visit to the

clinic and she spends her own money each week buying small toys for each one.

"I don't want them coming in fretting about what's going to happen. I want them to think instead, I wonder what she's got for me ..." she says. "I don't care if they come three or four times a week, they get something."

Her generosity often extends to siblings as well. First-time visitors to the clinic often receive a teddy bear in addition to a toy.

"Sometimes when you have things done, you need something to cuddle. The children know that every time they come, Marjorie will have something for them."

"You've got to have all of these things done;

we've got to get you better. But we all love you and I will be here for you," she tells the kids.

Mrs. Brewster was 29 when she and her husband Ken came to Canada from Stevenage in Hertfordshire, England. They had three young daughters in tow, aged two, four and six. They went on to have seven children in total. People thought she was crazy having such a large family, but she loved children so much and felt it was her calling.

Sadly, the couple lost three of the seven—Linda to undiagnosed diabetes at five; only son James to cancer at eight and Wendy, mother of two, to cancer at 44.

Mrs. Brewster has lived with insulin-dependent diabetes for 55 years. Her attitude towards hardship has always been to laugh rather than cry.

"If I cry, is it leaving? No," she says emphatically. "Well then what the heck, I'm stuck with it, no sense worrying. Yes, I can sit and cry occasionally, but I don't allow much of it. Life is hard on everybody at times."

This outlook extends to her work at the clinic. She enjoys sitting and talking to parents, but insists on positive thoughts and building resilience. Having been through the experience of having a very sick child, she can relate to and empathize with families in ways few others can.

"Our son got leukemia when he was five," Mrs. Brewster says. "We were told he had maybe six months, but we managed to love him for four years. The doctors said it was because of all the love." James, known as Jimmy, was just two weeks shy of his ninth birthday when he died.

The children at the clinic can't help but remind her of Jimmy and the ordeal he went through 43 years ago at Princess Margaret Hospital.

"I've gone through it," she says, eyes lowered. Parents tell her they can talk to her because she understands. "You've walked this walk. You know what it's like," they say.

Mrs. Brewster is a force, never one to sit still. She cleans endlessly, insisting upon a spotless, germ-free environment for the kids. Even with the generous time commitment, she doesn't consider any of it work.

"It's the satisfaction of doing something and helping. I love what I do and I love the kids—just the thought that I can bring a smile and take away the pain," she says.

Her plan is clearly working.

"The kids just love her, they love coming here. It's Marjorie's hospital, Grandma's clinic," says paediatric oncology nurse Lisa Egan-Bates.

Parents connect with her, too.

"A lot of times the parents will just happily sit there and chat with Marjorie while the children are playing," Ms Egan-Bates says. She's always got an ear willing to listen to them. It's different for them to be able to talk about things with Marjorie than it is for them to talk to a health care professional who's providing the medical treatment for their kids."

Maureen Edmed brings her six-year-old grandson Cole to the clinic for treatment. She says Marjorie knows the names of all the children who are coming and is ready to greet them and offer a gift.

"It turns a very frightening experience for them into a little bit of magic," she says. "Especially on days when they're having a treatment that's a little bit harder and they're more



Cole Edmed, a patient at Southlake's paediatric oncology clinic, enjoys a toy given to him by volunteer Marjorie Brewster. Jim Craigmyle photograph

anxious, she seems to have just the right thing lined up for them. It makes such a difference; it makes going fun."

Mrs. Brewster keeps juice in the fridge and snacks in the cupboard in case little ones are at the hospital longer than expected. She's a huge support for parents and grandparents.

"She's a grandmother, she's a mother, she's had two children with cancer—she knows. She can listen and guide you through some pretty rough spots. She's also not the least bit intimidated by very sick children—that's another thing, that wonderful calm. She just makes it like it's a normal experience," Mrs. Edmed says. "There's a very loving, warm atmosphere and it's down to Marjorie. Every single child that goes through there, big or little, just loves her."

Mrs. Brewster wears a number of pins, many of them guardian angels given to her by the kids. While each is meaningful, one holds special significance. In 2000, she received a community volunteer award from then-Lt.-Gov. Hilary Weston. She went to Queen's Park for

a special reception, had her photograph taken and spoke to the press.

She has a large, loving family, including four daughters, 10 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. Her husband passed away eight years ago; they'd been married 57 years.

"I've had a wonderful life," she says. "I have no regrets. I had a marvelous childhood where I never wanted for a thing. I had a father that absolutely couldn't do enough for you. I had a wonderful marriage and a wonderful life. I'm happy."

Recently a mother told Mrs. Brewster this was the happiest clinic she'd ever been to: There's so much laughter, so many great stories and the kids just love her. It was exactly what the dedicated volunteer wanted to hear.

Mrs. Edmed says Mrs. Brewster is a marvelous example for all of us of how you can look after yourself, age terrifically and give of yourself to other people. She thinks she should be named volunteer of a lifetime.

"We are very happy going there. It's like going home."