



Mt. Washington
Pediatric Hospital

Where Children Go to Heal and Grow

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An affiliate of University of Maryland Medical System and Johns Hopkins Medicine

Centennial Spotlight:

A Life of Service, One Hour at a Time



In MWPH's 100 years, volunteers have committed countless hours to serving patients and their families. 86-year-old Tom Murtaugh has been volunteering for decades, and he recently started volunteering at Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospital in 2018.

Tom began giving his time to others many years ago, while working at the Ridge Lumber Company in Baltimore County. At that time, he started a program collecting food for local families in need. He later served on the board of trustees at his children's high school, volunteered through his church in many capacities, and even coached girls' softball, all while raising his four children. "I don't know what got me started in volunteering, but it's something I've always done," he said.

Since his retirement in 1996, Tom has expanded his volunteering across a range of activities and organizations. In 1999, he joined the Bykota Senior Center in Towson because he was interested in playing basketball a few times a week with his fellow retirees. Today, he is the president of the

Bykota Senior Center, and his basketball team is on its way to a national basketball tournament for players 65 and older—he's playing on the 85 to 89 team. He also volunteers with the Baltimore County of Aging's home team program, bringing food to older residents and connecting with them for some friendly conversation or a visit.

On top of all of that, Tom volunteers each week as a cuddler at Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospital (MWPH). "Every day, I'm doing something, and I like it that way," he said.

About MWPH's cuddler program

MWPH's popular cuddler program is just what it sounds like: volunteers spend time each week holding and comforting babies who are crying or



who need attention. The cuddlers play a key role in the care MWPB provides to babies in the Pakula Center for Infant Specialty Care. This unit, dedicated to babies who are born premature or who have complex medical needs, is supported by cuddlers. Babies get the comfort and one-on-one attention they deserve, freeing nurses up to focus on bedside care. To become a cuddler, volunteers fill out an application and go through an extensive pre-hire screening and training process. Each cuddler must commit to 100 volunteer hours each year. Tom looks forward to crossing the 500-hour mark this summer.

Tom started as a cuddler at MWPB in 2018. “Everybody loves babies, and I thought it would be interesting.” At the start of each shift, Tom puts on his “uniform,” a smock that designates him as a volunteer, and begins making his rounds. He checks in with the nurses who are working that day and says hello to staff members and patient families on the unit.

When he hears a baby cry, that’s his cue. “I’ll go to that room, and if they’re not getting ready for a feeding or therapy session, I’ll ask if they need to be cuddled,” he said. “I hold them and rock them, talking softly to them to calm them down. Once they fall asleep, I’ll wait 10 to 15 minutes, then put them down gently and hope they stay asleep!” Tom generally cuddles two or three babies during each two-hour shift.

Tom knows that the cuddlers provide a valuable service to the hospital, but he enjoys the work as well. “It’s fun. It’s a challenge to quiet them down, and I love doing it,” he said. He also enjoys connecting with the patient families he sees during his shifts. “I think the parents like the idea that someone is cuddling and giving the babies attention while they’re not there,” he said.

Volunteers make MWPB work

Even if cuddling babies is not your idea of an ideal way to spend an afternoon, Tom encourages others to check out the many volunteer oppor-



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tunities available at MWPH. “I’ve chosen to stick to cuddling, but there are many more opportunities for volunteers—everything from helping with a big toy drive or working with older kids. They offer so much more that could be of interest. Cuddling is just one option.”

Volunteers make it possible for MWPH to deliver the high-touch care and personalized attention that the hospital is known for. According to Tammany Buckwalter, employee engagement and volunteer specialist at MWPH, Tom is a role


model for volunteers, both at MWPH and in the larger community.


“He’s such an unsung hero. He leads by example, and he is so important to the fabric of his community. The community is built not only on young people, but on the knowledge and experiences of older people,” she said. “Tom has sent many people to me to become volunteers from the senior center. They trust him, he inspires them, and they follow his example.”


THE TOP SIX BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING, ACCORDING TO TOM MURTAUGH

- 1 It’s the ultimate win-win.** “Volunteering is self-satisfying, because it feels good to give back,” Tom said. “At the same time, you’re helping an organization that needs you.”
- 2 It pays good fortune forward.** “When you’ve had a good life, it’s time to give back to people who need help. That way, you pass along your experience, knowledge, and enthusiasm to benefit future generations.”
- 3 It can be addictive.** “What I’ve found true for myself and other volunteers I’ve talked with is that the longer you do it, the more you want to do it. You keep finding ways to contribute.”
- 4 It’s simple to get started.** “Just find something that interests you and give it a try. If it turns out that one particular volunteer opportunity is not enjoyable for you, don’t force it. Move on and find something else. It’s okay if it takes a couple of tries to find the right volunteer role.” Organizations, Tom notes, can help in this regard by taking care to match the volunteers with a role that fits their interests.
- 5 It engages your mind and body.** “Volunteering helps keep me busy and active. If I’m spending a few hours each day doing something to help someone else, whether it’s a family member, a friend, or an organization I’m volunteering with, I’m happy.”
- 6 It can enrich your life in surprising ways.** You may find that volunteering gives you the opportunity to continue contributing to a field you are passionate about, and you can also make great friends through volunteering. Tom is putting his cuddling skills to good use in his own life. “I have two great-grandchildren—the oldest is 2 years old—and I’m about to become a great-grandfather for the third time. I know I’ll be using my baby-soothing skills quite a lot!”

To learn more about volunteer opportunities available at MWPH and to apply to become a volunteer, visit mwph.org/giving/volunteer.

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