

Everyday Heroes Make a Difference in California

By Janet Howard

Walk into the lobby of the Southern California Regional Offices at Walnut Center in Pasadena, and you will be greeted by a larger-than-life photograph of a man grinning broadly as he demonstrates how to tape wires to his head in preparation for a night of observation in the Fontana Sleep Lab. He is Bert Henry, Polysomnograph Technician, and his story is up on the wall because his coworkers thought everyone else at Kaiser Permanente (KP) should know how good he is at easing patients' anxieties and getting them to relax.

Further down the hall,

Maria Carrasco, MD, smiles out from a photograph next to her quote, "When you understand your patients, you earn their trust and you can better treat them." A simple truth, but Dr Carrasco, a Family Medicine physician at the Baldwin Park Medical Center, has turned it into a daily reality by championing around-the-clock interpreter services for members who speak limited English and by educating physicians about the cultural customs that influence how patients perceive health care.

Around the corner, another photograph shows

Nancy Falvo, RN, in Education and Training at Los Angeles Medical Center, with Earl, a KP member for 42 years. They have known each other for a long time, and share the kind of bond that forms between a patient who needs ongoing care and a nurse educator who can "take the mystery out of illness and recovery." Nancy worked closely with Earl's family to help them master a complex intravenous therapy.

Who are these people, and why are their photographs and stories covering the walls at Walnut Center? They are Heroes, and they are part of a growing number of KP California physicians and staff being honored by their coworkers and regional leadership as part of the Everyday Heroes program. Some Heroes are honored for a particular act of kindness, others for their consistently high quality of work or deep involvement in the community. Most are surprised by the honor and take pains to share the recognition or downplay the importance of what they do. As the plaque at the front of the gallery reads,

"If you tell them they are heroes, they will tell you what they did was not so much. If you ask the person who received their goodwill, they will tell you it made all the difference."

Jeffrey Weisz, MD, SCPMG Medical Director-Elect, says the Everyday Heroes program lets us acknowledge people who might otherwise be almost invisible. "Most heroes share one important quality: humility. They don't give of themselves because they're seeking public recognition; they do it because they feel it's their simple duty. The campaign is great because it gives us the chance to applaud our exceptional physicians and staff members."

An Event That Became a Program

Everyday Heroes started out as a one-time event two years ago, but the experience resonated strongly, and now the program is evolving into a multi-layered, ongoing recognition project. Everyday Heroes are honored in a number of ways, which can include: coverage in local newsletters and on the Intranet portal, InsideKP; a

pin with a special logo design; and a certificate signed by regional leadership. A cross section of Heroes are selected for inclusion in rotating exhibits of the Everyday Heroes galleries, located at Walnut Center and also at 1950 Franklin Street in Oakland, Northern California's Regional Offices. The galleries are permanent displays, designed to complement the existing lobby architecture, and the MultiMedia Communications Departments of the Northern and Southern California Regions create the recognition panels, using professional photography and state-of-the-art printing. The overall effect is a powerful visual statement about the dynamic physicians and employees of KP, and how we work together creatively to improve both quality and service.

Unlike many corporate employee-recognition projects that reduce a series of workers to faces-of-the-month, the Everyday Heroes program tells specific, true stories about real people, representing every kind of work, all nominated by their peers. It's an opportunity for



The Everyday Heroes recognition panel for Maria Carrasco, MD, currently on display in the Walnut Center gallery.

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physicians and employees to publicly call attention to the people who truly stand out and make everyone around them glad to come to work. Nominations often contain phrases like, “He makes our department feel like a family” or “She is the shining gem of our department.” Sometimes physicians are nominated by staff members who are amazed by a particular doctor’s commitment: “He’s never ‘already too busy’ to add a patient on or call them at home.” And physicians are often delighted to have the chance to thank the people they depend on every day: “I am thrilled to nominate my outstanding administrative partner.” The descriptions are often quite emotional, and grow out of all the tiny moments of interaction that, over time, build lasting bonds of loyalty and respect.

Maree Flores, a Customer Service Representative at Los Angeles Medical Center, is exactly the kind of Hero who quietly and steadily goes about her business of helping patients. Motivated by memories of her sister’s battle with bone cancer in the 1960’s, Maree says that she understands the emotional fragility of the members who ask her, “Where do I go? What do I do?” She always steps in and provides both information and kindness. When her coworkers, who are privileged to witness her work every day, found out about the Everyday Heroes award, they were delighted to nominate her. Lorrie Lewis, Manager of Member Services, said, “I’d guess we get about 75 letters every month complimenting Maree on her knowledge, professionalism and courtesy. I don’t think I’ve met a more



Varoujan Altebarmakian, MD, PIC, congratulates Linda Mroz, RN, on the Everyday Heroes panel recognizing her work as a Clinical Nurse Educator in Fresno.

caring person in my life.”

An Everyday Heroes program guarantees that we take notice of people like Maree, who regularly intervene in a member’s moment of crisis to lessen fears and build hope. We work in the “health care” field, by definition a kind of work committed to healing and caring. But it is also work that places huge demands—physical, emotional, intellectual, and financial—on everyone involved. Over time, spirits may start to sag and the daily juggling can take its toll, damaging both focus and perspective. We need to find ways to remind ourselves and each other of our shared endeavor, and how lucky we are to be a part of it.

As Oliver Goldsmith, MD, SCPMG Medical Director, points out, “By its very nature, a health care organization is made up of caring people. Because of that fact, we can often take for granted that KP physicians and employees

raise the bar on a daily basis in caring for and improving the lives of others. The Everyday Heroes campaign reminds us of the wonderful things individuals in our organization are doing.”

Everyday Hero Teams

Another major goal of the program is to honor the ways individuals at KP come together as teams. A trio of women at the Mountain View pharmacy exemplify how well various skills can be woven together to respond to a wide range of members’ needs. Pharmacist Amy Chih routinely translates three Chinese dialects. Pharmacy Tech Jeannie Stamper buys stickers for the children who visit the pharmacy because she wants them to know that “not everyone who wears a white coat is going to give them a shot.” And Pharmacist Lucia Lim personally delivers medication to elderly or disabled

patients. She enjoys going to their homes, saying, “It’s a gift for me to help our members.”

And some of the best stories are about people who don’t even get paid to work their magic—like the Senior Care Connection volunteers in Riverside, most of whom are elderly themselves, who have built a network of support for seniors in their community.

The Everyday Heroes stories bear witness to a central KP philosophy that has its roots in the past. Sidney Garfield, MD, and his staff scraped together a little desert hospital out of hard work and teamwork, and later painstakingly worked out the concept of prepaid health care at Grand Coulee Dam while withstanding the onslaught of outside forces trying to destroy the experiment. Again and again, the KP strategy has been to build the workplace as a kind of home, a creative and energizing space where physicians and employees can work together toward common goals—a true “group practice.”

The Galleries

The KP tradition of internal support is evident in the pleasure coworkers derive from the opportunity to thank each other and publicize stories about people they admire. And the gallery installations are a way to gather



The West LA Congestive Heart Failure Team, honored for dramatically improving the quality of life for members with CHF.

up some of those stories and share them with a wider audience. Anyone who walks through the lobbies of Walnut Center or Franklin Street and pauses to read the panels and look at the photographs will learn a great deal about what's going on at KP. The physicians and employees who nominate Heroes are saying, to each other and to our members, "This is who we are; these are the things that matter to us."

The Everyday Heroes program also spreads the word about particular projects associated with the Heroes—breast cancer activism, training for adolescent parents, or, in the case of Brigid McCaw, MD, from Richmond, the Family Violence Prevention Center she founded after witnessing too much hidden abuse. The gallery in Oakland included her story, and her words are powerful: "I was watching victims of domestic violence coming into and going out of the Emergency Department again and again, as though they were stuck in a revolving door." How many people who stood reading those words recognized themselves or someone they know? How many memorized the name of the Center and resolved to get help after "meeting" Dr McCaw in the lobby of 1950 Franklin?

An Expanding Program: Regional to Local

The Everyday Heroes program is generating more interest as it becomes more visible, and medical centers around the state are considering gallery installations in their own facilities. Local recognition programs and the Everyday Heroes program can support each other, increasing the effect of both. The regional galleries honor Heroes from various facilities, but a local Heroes program focuses on people who already know each other and understand the specific challenges they share.

In December, the Fresno facility unveiled its own gallery, and by all accounts the event was a significant experience for the entire workforce. Olga Blanco of Environmental Services, who was honored as a Hero for her commitment to "making the facility sparkle for our members," wept in amazement as she watched over 100 friends and coworkers walk through the new gallery.

Varoujan Altebarmakian, MD, PIC, told the crowd, "This is our way of saying 'thank you' to those who serve. The people on this wall have served our members, our colleagues, and the world." And Dr Altebarmakian reports that, in the weeks since the opening, the exhibit is continuing to impact the



The Everyday Heroes gallery opening in Fresno.

Fresno facility. "The Heroes Gallery has created a tremendous sense of pride in our medical center. When people walk by the pictures of the physicians and staff it motivates them to want to be considered as a hero. The greatest outcome has been a direct sense that leadership visibly cares about public recognition."

Even in the regional galleries, people often recognize someone they know—or someone they would like to emulate. Richard Cordova, President of Kaiser Permanente Southern California, says, "Our Everyday Heroes are role models. They have a mindset that exemplifies the KP Promise because they go out of their way to make our members and colleagues feel better. These heroes have shown us that a little extra attention can make a big difference when

cares for our members." And their stories inspire others. During the most recent changing of the recognition panels, a woman ran up and said, "Wait! Are you taking that one down? I wanted to remember what she said." She took out a notebook and quickly recorded the quote from San Diego

when someone needs a few words of inspiration.

Robert Pearl, MD, TPMG Medical Director, reminds us, "Ever since the founding of Kaiser Permanente, the reason for our remarkable success has been the excellence of our people. Each day, hundreds of individuals go the extra mile to meet a patient's needs, cure a complex medical problem or comfort a family in grief. The Everyday Heroes program recognizes some of these physicians, nurses and staff. Each of us should be proud both of their accomplishments and of our own contributions."

Everyday Heroes is a simple idea with a strong impact: the more we know about the good

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To nominate an Everyday Hero, please call us, or visit the KP Intranet site: hero.kp.org.

neonatalist Pat Bromberger: "Infants have such an amazing capacity to heal and grow. They can overcome so much. Any effort to help them survive is rewarded many times over." And so thoughts like that are collected and passed on, to be used

work being done by KP physicians and staff, the better the work will become. When we focus on the best we have to offer each other, our members and the community, we deepen the base of pride that is the richest soil for our future growth. ❖