

Sister's visits are the right RX

By CATHLEEN F. CROWLEY Staff Writer

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Sister Patricia Houlihan smiles as she talks about her volunteer work in the emergency room at St. Peters Hospital in Albany. (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)

ALBANY-- With her strawberry hair, rosy cheeks and pink pants, Sister Patricia Houlihan whirls through the halls of the emergency room like a red pinwheel.

"I hope you have roller skates to keep up with her," warns Barbara A. Salisburg, a registered nurse in the emergency department of St. Peter's Hospital. Sure enough, Houlihan disappears down a corridor and through swinging doors. She returns escorting a patient from the waiting room into the ER.

"Hi, I'm Sister Pat. I volunteer here," she says to patients. "I have one question for you. Howya doin'?"

The answer is usually "not so good" or "I've been better." But after a few minutes with Houlihan, many are laughing.

"Since she's been here, patient satisfaction has gone up tremendously," said Sherry Ruschmeyer, manager of the emergency department.

"She's comforting and soothing, and she's not intimidated by the setting. ...She's brought a lot of peace to our patients and staff."

Houlihan, 75, worked in Capital Region Catholic schools for 53 years, 21 as principal of St. Teresa of Avila Elementary School and 19 as principal of Holy Cross Elementary School. When the schools merged last year, Houlihan was out of a job and ready to volunteer. She had three requirements: She wanted to be free to celebrate the Eucharist every day, she wanted to work with people and she wanted it to be a ministry. "This fit the bill," she said.

There are three things the poor value more than gold, she said, quoting Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy -- Houlihan's religious order.

"A kind word, a gentle compassionate look and a patient hearing of sorrows," she said. "I translate that to a warm blanket, a pillow and listening."

Houlihan floats around the department talking to patients and staff. She explains why the wait is so long -- like the time 10 ambulances arrived in the span of 7 minutes, but people in the waiting room couldn't see the ambulance bay and had no idea.

As she walks by a room, Houlihan sees a patient is dozing and dims the overhead light while placing a hand on the shoulder of a family member.

One time, a patient heard her introduction, froze and said "I don't want you to pray or anything."

"Too late," Houlihan said. "I've already prayed for you. You have to get me by 5:30 in the morning."

At her morning Communion, she prays for every patient that she is going to meet that day, and their families and the staff.

An asthma attack sent Margaret Przekurat, 81, of Colonie to the ER recently. Houlihan took the woman's hand and asked "Howya doin'?"

"Lousy," Przekurat said. Quickly, they were trading names of local nuns they knew. Przekurat chuckled as she recalled a vivid memory of a nun punishing her for standing under an off-limits magnolia tree.

As Houlihan bid goodbye, Przekurat's daughter, Debbie Gentile, of Duanesburg told her, "you were like a breath of sunshine here."

*Cathleen F. Crowley can be reached at 454-5348 or ccrowley@timesunion.com
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