Maryville Activities Director, Hilee Jackson, keeps the nursing home residents ‘going and going’

Hilee Jackson loves to go for a ride. But, we’re not talking about cruising solo on a Harley Davidson at sunset.

No. It’s a ride that offers a different kind of freedom — the freedom of variety. Hilee takes her joyrides with the residents of Maryville Nursing Home. As their longtime Activities Director, it takes a whole week to pack the necessary supplies each time she takes a group out for an excursion.

“Using a borrowed mini bus from nearby Valley of residents out for an excursion. When they can’t get out, back home Hilee keeps her residents engaged with creative classes and social gatherings. It could be card-making, quilting, ceramics, flower arranging, a sing-a-long or a holiday bazaar.

“When people are making crafts, I like to let them know that what they are creating is needed around here somewhere. ‘That’s pretty easy to do at Maryville where the seasonal holidays are constantly being celebrated. ‘I feel 12 years old most of the time,’ Hilee says.

Hilee’s enthusiasm is often contagious, but there are a handful of residents who don’t want to participate in the fun things she has planned. “Everyone has a right to say no,” says Hilee, “but I take it on as a personal and creative challenge to help people get out of isolation and into socialization.” Even if they are unable to do the activity, Hilee says that love and attention are good medicine for all.

As Activities Director, it’s not always fun and games. The work requires a tremendous amount of meticulous tracking of paper and documentation, including preparing for quarterly care conferences when families and staff put their heads together about how to provide the best service to each resident. Hilee evaluates new residents as they are admitted, assesses their status, and helps set goals for each person.

Many people arrive at Maryville having had to give up special things in their lives, like being around family and pets. Some have sacrificed a certain standard of living or independence and coming to a nursing home can be sad for some, at first.

“If I’m walking down the hall and I see someone crying, there goes the paperwork. I just sit with them.” She tells a story of one man who was afraid because he was just learning that he had some mental health issues. Hilee put her arm around him and comforted him by saying, “Don’t worry, Honey, so do I.”

When asked why she likes working with the elderly, Hilee speaks of a woman she knew at her very first job. Her work was doing housekeeping and laundry at a nursing home in California. “I fell in love with this little old lady whose last name was Fox. We called her Foxy.” Part of the affection she shares with her residents is giving them nicknames, but she always asks their permission first.

Hilee describes the residents as wise and funny — and a good audience for her jokes. Her passion for those for whom she cares oozes from her happy pores and radiates from every strand of her fiery red hair.

“This is usually the end of their life or their last home. How dare we not do something good for them!” Hilee joyfully treats every resident as her own loved one.

“This is not just my job, it’s my ministry.”

“A FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH” Hilee Jackson observes ceramic painting by residents Barbara and Marie. The ceramics were sold in February during their Valentine’s Sale. Photo by Scott Cary

“The Energizer Bunny

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“Staff comes and goes and there has been steady change at Maryville over the years; but Hilee is always there. She knows all residents by name and really gets to know the families and becomes one of us. She is a lifeline for many of the residents, keeping up their spirits and encouraging them.” Mary Flanagan, Daughter of Maryville Resident

By Karen Crandal, the Director of Communications and Public Relations for the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon Foundation.