Group offers support for recent brain injury victims

Several days every month, a volunteer in a blue smock rounds on patients at Piedmont Fayette Hospital. The volunteer is a member of the Brain Injury Peer Support Group and the patients that he or she visits with are recent victims of a stroke or a brain injury. That brief visit is often the first time that a fellow brain injury or stroke survivor, or caregiver, has reached out to them or their loved ones and let them know that they are not alone.

Pat Buice has been involved in offering encouragement to survivors and their caregivers since 1984. Her son had been in a work-related accident, which required three years of rehabilitation and visits with seven different doctors. One of the doctors said that other patients needed encouragement and asked Buice and her son to visit with them.

"My son was in the ICU for 30 days with multiple injuries and he returned with major complications after we were only home for six days," Buice said, "I promised God that if He would give me my son back that I would always give back to the community."

Soon, Buice launched an official support group so that members could share information about insurance and rehabilitation and also offer each other a chance to talk to others who understood what they were all going through. Later, she found the Brain Injury Peer Visitor Program, started by Ann Borsko in September of 2006, and eventually was the first one to round on patients for the group at Piedmont Fayette Hospital. Buice now visits patients at Piedmont Henry, as do Charles and Linda Stanley, while Diana Russell visits patients at Piedmont Fayette. Buice and Linda Stanley can both speak to the experience of the caregivers, while Charles is a stroke survivor and Russell is a survivor of a traumatic brain injury.

"Around 10 years ago, I was in the rehab department of a hospital and the staff asked me to talk to this guy who wouldn't do the exercises they wanted him to do. I spoke with him about my injury and recovery and he started doing what he had to do to take care of himself," Russell said. "That got me interested in helping people and I found this group."

Russell was in a motorcycle accident. She was put into an induced coma, had four brain surgeries and had to learn to do everything all over again. When she came out of the coma, her right side was completely paralyzed and she couldn't see out of either eye. Now, once a week, she walks the halls of Piedmont Fayette to share her story with people going through a difficult time to let them know they aren't alone and they can fight their way back.

Charles and Linda Stanley are like the dynamic duo of Brain Injury Peer visitors as they can speak to the issues facing both a brain injury victim and a caregiver. Charles had a stroke five years ago and was visited in the hospital by Buice. It took him nine months to be able to learn to walk and talk again, but he knew that he wanted to give back and help others who were facing a situation similar to his. Linda stresses that caregivers need to have patience with their loved ones.

"On the outside, they look like the same person you've always known, but they are different on the inside," Linda said. "They may behave differently or react to things differently and it may be permanent or it may only last a little while. When dealing with someone who has had a brain injury, patience truly is a virtue."

Charles, who worked with Fayetteville's Department of Public Works for 30 years, and was also a youth football coach, is always sure to tell the people he visits with the importance of taking care of themselves.

"Diet and exercise are always important, but it is just as important to always take your medication as the doctors have prescribed it," Charles said. "It's also important to stick with it and never give up. Everyone's recovery is going to be different, because each stroke effect everyone differently."

Charles and Linda are both involved with Buice's brain injury support group that meets once a month and they extend their offer of support to every patient and caregiver they meet. They know how important it is for people to know that they are not alone in handling a difficult situation such as this, as well as how important it is to keep working towards recovery.

"This program provides amazing value to our patients and their caregivers," said Lisa Jackson, manager of the stroke program at Piedmont Fayette. "Not only are they instantly linked with resources that can help them in and out of the hospital or rehabilitation, but they get proof that there is life after a traumatic incident and that there are people out there willing to listen and help."

Members of the Brain Injury Peer Visitors visit Piedmont Fayette and Piedmont Henry Hospital each month. For more information on the group, visit brain-injurypeervisitor.org. For more information on stroke programs at Piedmont, visit piedmont.org/neurosciences.