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Nursing home volunteer receives award

MATTHEW LEBLANC | The Journal Gazette

Denny Parker has made a lot of friends by doing a little bit of everything.

He's met countless people while cooking, taking orders and waiting tables over 40 years in his day job, at Fort Wayne's Famous Coney Island restaurant.

But the connections he holds most dear were made at Heritage Park, an assisted-living facility on Hobson Road. He began volunteering there six years ago.

Parker, 64, is there early every weekend. He hands out newspapers and the Daily Chronicle, an information sheet he puts together that includes trivia and a list of the day's planned activities.

He reads to residents who can't see the type and sits and talks with people who don't have visitors – or someone to sit and listen to their stories. He's been known to tend to gardens on the property.

For all that, Heritage Park honored Parker with its Compassion Award, given each year to someone who has shown “compassion above and beyond the expectations and standards practiced in health care,” a spokeswoman for American Senior Communities, which operates the facility, said in an email. He recently received the award at a Fort Wayne Komets game.

“He's there to help if you need anything,” resident Marna Bixler, 86, said Tuesday. “If you're down, get around Denny and you've lost that.”

It's true. Parker is quick with a smile and a laugh.

Volunteering for him is a way to avoid slowing down. Too many of his friends have retired and just stopped living life, he said.

It's also personal. In 2010, he spent some time at the facility after he was diagnosed with a serious medical problem.

Discharged in 2011, he came back to help. And he kept coming back.

"Heritage Park is like a second family to me," he said.

Residents and staff say the feeling is mutual.

Activities director Sherrie Murphy said his help is invaluable. Elizabeth Cowherd, admissions director, said Parker is always available.

"He continues to show day in and day out what care should be about," a letter from marketing director Jane King nominating Parker for the award says.

Lois Kaufman, 93, said she's lived at the facility a couple years and got to know Kaufman quickly.

Parker says he's just happy to help out.

"It's my way of saying thank you to the Almighty for keeping me alive," he said.

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