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Kathryn Christian in Munson Medical Center's chapel.

Helping the hurting

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A listening ear and a quiet, comforting demeanor — those are the tools Kathryn Christian brings to work with her every day. The Williamsburg resident is one of two full-time hospital chaplains at Traverse City's Munson Medical Center, offering support, pastoral presence, and prayer when requested by patients, family and staff as well as in the midst of medical emergencies within the facility.

It's a position that requires innate sensitivity along with specialized training in coming alongside others during some of their most distressing circumstances. "I believe in the whole person," Kathryn said. "Medical is one piece; emotional and spiritual are other pieces of who we are. In a wholistic approach, ideally we can deal with each one of those. I see myself as integral support staff to the doctors and nurses."

Kathryn grew up in North Muskegon, Michigan. She earned a bachelor's degree in world religions from Oberlin College and Conservatory and a master's degree in theology from New Brunswick Theological Seminary. "I was raised Catholic, went to a Protestant seminary, and am now at an Episcopal church and about to enter a diaconate program to become a deacon," she said. "My long-range goal is to be ordained."

While her education and training equipped her with the knowledge and skill set to minister to those who are struggling, it was a personal crisis that gave Kathryn the inspiration, motivation, and relatability to serve others. Between her freshman and sophomore years of high school, her father was killed in a private airplane crash, causing her to delve intensely into questions of life and death, faith and spirituality, the meaning and purpose of suffering.

"It changed me from an average teen into a soul-seeking one, finding my faith at a deep and important level," she explained. "So, connecting with others going through grief and loss and tragedy felt very meaningful, because I had been there."

Kathryn never knows what a day in the hospital will bring her way. A clergy census — a compilation of patient admissions including requests for a visit from a chaplain — awaits her when she arrives in her office each morning. She and her co-worker each take half the names and begin making rounds, often adding to their list referrals from families and hospital staff. Sometimes an emergent situation arises that demands her immediate presence.

It takes a combination of confidence, courage, and discernment to step into the lives of strangers knowing that something you say or don't say, do or don't do has the potential to make a marked difference for those dealing

with their own injury or illness or the death of a loved one. Offering non-judgmental support and compassion is critical, Kathryn said, in quickly establishing a level of trust that enables a meaningful connection to be made with people, regardless of their faith or beliefs.

But regardless of the particulars of each visit, she enters the room with the same goal. "I have no agenda but to be present with them in their story and offer whatever they need," she explained. "I'm there to listen, to pray, or to just be. I let the patient or family guide. Part of it is being intuitive and being a good listener with the heart as well as the ears."

Kathryn recalled a time when a patient had died while young grandchildren were on their way to the hospital. "When they arrived, I said a prayer at the bedside and tried to help them and their younger brains come to some kind of comfortable understanding of this mysterious process of death," she said. "I remember as young person, some people saying to me, 'It must have been God's will,' which is the first thing they teach you in seminary never to say, because we don't always know God's will. You learn not to give any kind of scripted theological response to tragedy."

Music is another tool Kathryn uses to create an atmosphere of peace and calm for those in the hospital. An accomplished musician (writer, vocalist, and instrumentalist), she regularly wheels one of the hospital's Celtic harps throughout the hallways, setting up and playing softly in or just outside patients' rooms. Harp music, Kathryn says, often generates a physical response, lowering blood pressure and heart rate, reducing pain, and increasing relaxation.

"It can do some things that words and prayer can't; it has its own language," she said. "It somehow touches the soul with a sense of spiritual well-being, a sense of peace, of being held and comforted. Children respond really well to it. I played for a baby going through withdrawal who was extremely colicky and hard to soothe. The staff had been rocking and walking with no success. I played the harp and within ten minutes, the baby fell sleep."

Beverly Warnaar is a social work case manager on Munson's oncology unit and has worked with Kathryn for 25 years. She recalled a recent cancer patient whose care was complicated by dementia. "When Kathryn would come in and play for him, it was amazing," she said. "He would open his eyes and thank her. You could just see the connection that wasn't happening with people who tried to verbally communicate with him. Kathryn's presence is always at a deeper level. She has a calmness, a wonderful aura about her."

Because Kathryn has an intrinsic and deep-seated love for people young and old and a gentle, approachable manner, she often finds herself listening to those who need to process difficult emotions, work through fears, or confess regrets.

"People seem to feel comfortable opening up to me," she said. "I tend to not have a lot of judgment. I've heard a lot. It takes a lot to shock me. God's love is so much bigger than our mess-ups. I like to use the image of Jesus on the



Kathryn Christian plays harp music outside a patient's room at Munson Medical Center. Photos by Barb Mosher

shore cooking breakfast for Peter after he denied Him. That kind of love and forgiveness is hard for us to fathom, because it's not our way of thinking and being, but it's God's way, and part of my mission is to share that."

While Kathryn is a committed Christian, she's able to seamlessly minister to people of any faith or no faith. It's not her job to convert, she says, but to simply offer loving presence. "If I'm living my life faithfully, that speaks louder than any proselytizing. The older I get, the more I understand it's less about me and more about God."

But how does a hospital chaplain, who witnesses so much pain and loss and grief and continuously pours out to others, maintain her own spiritual and emotional equilibrium?

"It's heavy, and some days are really hard," Kathryn said. "My own care of my spiritual and physical health is really important. Daily prayer is my lifeline. I'll use a line from Scripture as a mantra I float in my mind throughout the day. Being in nature, breathing the air, swimming, running, biking, yoga, cross-country skiing, those things are restorative. And I try to enjoy life and to be fully present and appreciate the simple things, because I see on a daily basis how precious and fleeting life is."

For more information on Kathryn's music ministry, go to www.kathrynchristianmusic.com.

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