

Volunteer Brings Passion for Gardening to Hospital's Garden of Hope

The first word Gloria Suttmeier ever said was “pretty,” in reference to a daffodil.

So it's no surprise that gardening would turn out to be her passion later on in life.

Gloria has become Southampton Hospital's own personal gardener, planting and tending to thousands of flowers around the building on a volunteer basis over the last two years. From containers outside the front lobby, to the flowers in front of the Emergency Department entrance, Gloria has nearly every inch of the Hospital's grounds covered—especially the Garden of Hope, where she has planted an estimated 4,000 bulbs.

“It's like my own garden,” the volunteer said in an interview last month. “I really enjoy it. It's so relaxing. There's always somebody to talk to.”

Gloria began to take charge over tending to the Hospital's flora after she was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2015. When she started chemotherapy, she was coming here once a week for blood work and often noticed that the containers of flowers near the front entrance needed to be watered, so she decided to help out by watering them herself. She then started coming in and out of the Herrick Road entrance and brought some flowers to plant around there. Taking care of the flowers near the Emergency Department followed soon after.

But being that she couldn't have a garden at home because of turkeys and chickens, she sought a public space she could treat as her own. After being turned away from a business within the community when requesting to plant flowers on its property, Gloria asked Heidi Varucene in Administration if she could plant in the Garden of Hope—a fitting choice, as the Garden was established decades ago as a haven for those battling cancer.

“They just said, ‘Do what you want to do.’ Then one thing became another and another and another—4,000 bulbs later,” Gloria said.

The Garden of Hope is where Gloria is able to flex her green thumb. She spends several hours a week scaling the space to make sure all the flowers are blooming and thriving. She's there so often that Hospital employees and visitors who frequent the Garden know her at least by face, if not by name. “I'm like the official greeter,” she joked.

Her grandson Sam helps with planting and maintenance of the water fountain, but Gloria handles everything else. She said that when she first began gardening there, she often just went with her gut in terms of where to place the flowers. “I didn't really have a plan—it was all in my head. It really just started with a few bulbs,” she explained. “[There are] a lot of things [where] you don't know how they were going to look. The whole thing was just a surprise to see how it turned out, how my head worked.”

Because Gloria has been given the freedom to do what she pleases with the Garden, she typically reaches into her own pocket to do. Not only does she pay for all of the flowers she plants with her own money, she also buys the décor. Gloria has personally invested in a birdbath, statues of Sts. Francis and

Fiacre, the umbrella at the picnic table, children's chairs, welcome signs, wind chimes, birdfeed, and repellent to keep deer and other critters from destroying the plants. Her wish list includes a sundial, a Buddha statue, and a small pagoda.

"This Hospital is very welcoming, the people are very welcoming," Gloria said. "It couldn't be any nicer."