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Local ladies hospital auxiliary decides to disband

Members have supported health care in Lethbridge for more than 70 years

LETHBRIDGE – They started out gathering informally more than 70 years ago – women from different churches knitting socks for Second World War soldiers and stitching pajamas and bedding for sick children at the city’s historic Galt Hospital.

In 1943, they made it official and formed an auxiliary.

After decades of tireless service, fundraising and care that contributed immeasurably to patient comfort and care, the auxiliary is disbanding. The organization’s most recent president, June Kometz, died in 2013, leaving the position vacant. A lack of new membership and the advancing age of remaining members have spelled the end to an era.

“Patient care was the prime reason for our being,” says past president Norah Hawn, 95. “I’m sad about us disbanding but there comes a time. We haven’t been able to get new members. Young women are not able to do what we have done because they’re working. Most young women have jobs now. And we didn’t, so we did our volunteer work.”

The early auxiliary served the Galt Hospital, Galt School of Nursing and Municipal Hospital (which later became Lethbridge Regional and then Chinook Regional Hospital). Members made holiday gifts for patients’ trays, cuddled babies in the nursery, held bake sales, portered patients and even served tea to the nurses.

Supporting and encouraging local student nurses was another major part of the auxiliary’s work.

“When the students arrived, we always had a party for them and for their families,” says Hawn, the auxiliary’s longest-serving member, having joined in 1968. “We held Christmas parties, special events, and organized their graduation ceremonies. All the girls would be there in their new white uniforms, with their caps, and all their families would be there. It was wonderful to see those girls come in and watch them graduate three years later. I really loved working with them.”

The auxiliary’s work increasingly evolved toward fundraising, with one noteworthy project being the Lights of Hope Campaign, which started in 1994.

Since 2000, the Lights of Hope campaign has raised more than \$1.6 million for the Chinook Regional Hospital Foundation. The auxiliary also held Easter Basket raffles and popular Ladies Auxiliary Teas; stylish events where silver tea services and china cups and saucers graced the tables. The group also donated the hospital’s patient-rental TVs.

Dr. Vanessa Maclean, Medical Director of AHS South Zone, says the auxiliary will be greatly missed. “For such a long time, the ladies of the auxiliary have done so much for patients and for nurses, as well,” says Dr. Maclean. “They’ve made an enormous impact on patient care.”

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The hospital and foundation will hold a come-and-go tea at 10 a.m. Oct. 23 in County Hall at Chinook Regional. The auxiliary's final donation of \$200,000 to the foundation will be presented at the Oct. 23 event.

"We're very grateful for this final donation and indeed for all the contributions the auxiliary has made for so many years," said Jason Vandenhoeck, Executive Director of Chinook Regional Hospital Foundation. "This tremendous gift will be used to create an Auxiliary to the Chinook Regional Hospital Endowment Fund. Income from the fund will be used to fund educational opportunities for front-line staff members."

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

- 30 -

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