



VOLUNTEER spotlight

Donna O'Hern: Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative

Three things about Donna O'Hern, 73, of East Rutherford, will never change: she is a nurse; she is a teacher; she gives back. Donna, an RN, is a nurse volunteer with Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative (BVMI). BVMI provides free, high-quality healthcare to Bergen County's working uninsured. BVMI's 75 volunteer healthcare professionals, including doctors and nurses like Donna, serve some 1,200 patients a year. BVMI sees patients five days a week, via telehealth and in its clinic. The organization also has nurse practitioners on staff who are available for phone consults and sick visits, both of which can eliminate the need for an uninsured patient to seek emergency room care.

The uninsured working population, explains Donna, includes many essential behind-the-scenes workers who otherwise would not get care. People like the cooks, dishwashers, waitstaff and busboys who keep restaurants running and open.

In December 2019, Berkeley College, where Donna taught nursing classes for 13 years, offered her an appealing package. She took it. She thought it would be nice to relax for a bit, but mostly planned to travel. An avid Yankees fan, Donna well remembers the day the pandemic shut the world down, erasing her travel plans for the foreseeable future. It was March 13, 2020, the day the Yankees closed spring practices.

Donna, who picked up photography as a hobby a few years ago, occupied much of her time photographing reclaimed art of the Meadowlands and nature. She met a lot of great birding photographers, but by January 2021 she was looking to do more with her time.

An online search brought Donna to the Bergen Volunteers website, which ultimately connected her with Redefining Retirement. She completed an information form. Not long after, liaison Karen Blick reached out to her. When



Karen mentioned BVMI as a potential volunteer match, Donna knew immediately it was what she wanted to pursue. Donna wanted to go someplace to volunteer; she missed being with colleagues. As a nurse and a retired teacher, she also felt her skills and experience could be put to good use as BVMI nurse volunteer.

Maternity is Donna's background, and that is what she primarily taught to her LPN and BSN students at Berkeley College. She also taught home health aides and those studying to become patient care technicians.

Karen connected Donna with Elaine Posner, the BVMI volunteer manager. Elaine set up a Zoom interview with Donna. After that, she visited the clinic where Elaine arranged for Donna to shadow some other nurse volunteers. By June, she had a regularly scheduled day. Donna volunteers at the BVMI clinic Wednesdays from 9:30am-12:30pm, or until the last patient is seen. She also pitches in other days when needed.

For Donna, volunteering at BVMI is not just about giving care to patients who otherwise have no access to healthcare. She enjoys teaching them how to manage their own health; she also finds helping people rewarding. "The BVMI clinicians care so much about the patients, and that resonates with me," says Donna. "Other retired doctors and nurses sitting at home need to know how valuable they are and how valued they would be at BVMI," says Donna.

"I always knew who I was," explains Donna. "I am a nurse. I am a faculty member. I am a colleague. When I retired, I wasn't any of these anymore. Volunteering with BVMI helped me realize these characteristics define me. Not because I work, but because it is who I am." Knowing she is appreciated and needed isn't too bad either.