

'Man of God' touched hearts at hospital

In the end, the Rev. Edward Gillespie was right about two things.

He would live long enough to spend a final Christmas at a bountiful holiday table with his family and closest friends.

And his death, just six days later, would be painless and peaceful.

Rev. Gillespie knew he was dying when we spoke early last December as he endured the final stages of pancreatic cancer.

He was frail. His legs and feet were swollen. And he had come to accept the fact that after 4½ years as a hospital chaplain comforting the sick, he was now the one who needed care.

All he knew for sure was that he would will himself to celebrate another Christmas and he prayed for a merciful ending — whenever that might be.

But there was one thing the 46-year-old priest could not predict.

And that is the tremendous effect his New Year's Eve passing would have on the staff and patients of West Jersey Hospital, Voorhees.



ROSEMARY PARRILLO

The cleric who loved a good joke as well as a good basketball game has left an empty spot at West Jersey.

And although Rev. Gillespie was a Catholic priest, the multi-denominational pastoral community as well as the administration and staff have decided to dedicate the hospital chapel to his memory.

On Tuesday, more than 100 people will gather for a ceremony to remember Rev. Gillespie's dedication to his patients and his enormous strength in continuing to heal others even when he was in great physical pain.

"He was just a super guy and a real human being," recalls Dr. Joseph Hummel, chairman of emergency medicine for West Jersey Health System.

"He was a religious man. But you could joke around and feel comfortable with him.

"He offered spiritual counsel for everyone. I'm not Catholic. But everybody needs the chaplain. We have critically ill people who are dying here (in the emergency room) and who want to make their peace. And father was always there."

Bunny Biderberg, who directs the hospital's staff of 450 volunteers, also remembers Rev. Gillespie as a hands-on cleric who never refused a request for assistance.

"He was always available to the patients. Even if he left for the day — if we'd call and tell him there was a patient in need of comfort or a critical situation with a family — he always made himself available."

And, of course, Bunny also remembers the days when being "available" was far more difficult for Rev. Gillespie than it sounds.

"Even as sick as he had been, he'd sit for hours at a time here. His strength was wonderful. He was so ill, but he'd make other people feel better.

"He'd just continue on. Even if he was suffering, he'd never let you know. He had such strength. It was overwhelming."

In fact, when Bunny started sending out invitations for the dedication, she was surprised at the enormous response.

"So many people want to come, we've had to move the ceremony from the chapel to conference rooms to accommodate everyone."

So next week, the hospital community will place a modest shadow box inscription on the chapel wall as a sign of gratitude as well as a recognition of father's courage:

Chaplain 1990-94

In memory of the Rev. Father Edward J. Gillespie

For his dedicated and selfless ministry of healing as Catholic Chaplain at West Jersey Hospital, Voorhees, New Jersey

It's a short, straight-forward description. But the sentiments behind it are far more emotional.

"The best you could say is when it came time to meet his maker, he did it with dignity and grace. And not everybody is capable of that," says Dr. Hummel.

"He truly was a man of God."