

Lifting their spirits

By Ruth Schenk | rschenk@secc.org

Sponge Bob is a favorite. So is Scooby Doo. And Dora.

Thirty minutes after gathering at Kosair Children's Hospital on Feb. 13, Balloon Angels have filled 200 balloons with helium from two huge tanks. Big red hearts say Happy Valentine's Day. There are Mickey Mouse balloons with ears, green Shreks, motorcycles complete with gear shifts, pink flamingos with long droopy legs and special bubble balloons of fish "swimming" in fishbowls.

Gina McQuillen started Balloon Angels in 2002 after a kingdom challenge from her pastor at Northeast Christian Church. She said "nothing but faith prepared me to do this. We do it because they're there, and we care."

That first night she took 10 balloons to children at Baptist Hospital East. McQuillen remembered how much a balloon meant to her own daughter when she was hospitalized.

Since then, Balloon Angels volunteers have given away more than 30,000 balloons at Kosair Children's Hospital, Home of the Innocents and Baptist Hospital East. They plan to expand to Lexington, Ky., Cincinnati and Indianapolis.

On Tuesday nights at Kosair Children's Hospital, McQuillen gathers volunteers for floor assignments and prayer before the group gets ready to "rock and roll."

Moving through the corridors is a comedy routine. Volunteers shimmy the huge, colorful bouquets through hospital halls. They squish into elevators where all passengers can see are feet. And they wiggle balloons through tight doorways.

Passers-by stop to watch the parade of colors and shapes. Children riding in wagons or wheelchairs grin as the group passes by.

By 6:30 p.m., volunteers are knocking on doors.

Kristen Pullen, 19, has been in and out of the hospital since she was diagnosed with leukemia last October. The hospital has become a second home through five rounds of chemotherapy. She looks forward to visits from Balloon Angels.

"My favorite balloon is the bubble with the dolphins," she tells volunteers. "I love the dolphins."

This time she picks a giant, canary-yellow happy face.

Pullen's mother, Valerie, said the balloons brighten long days at the hospital.

"We sit here a lot of long hours," she said. "When Kristen's feeling up to it, we play games and watch television. It's really exciting when the Balloon Angels come in. It's fun. The balloons are beautiful, and they really brighten the room."



Every Tuesday night, volunteers Joe Crawford and Jackie Nethery give away balloons at Kosair Children's Hospital.

Kristen takes balloons from her room at Kosair Children's back to her home in Indiana where life becomes more normal in between chemotherapy treatments.



Five-year-old James Burgess jumps up and down on his bed when Balloon Angels enter his room. First he picks out a Spiderman balloon for his brother and Dora for his sister. He finally chooses a red fire engine balloon for himself.

His mom, Nicole, says her son is a "balloon freak."

Volunteers stay to chat a few minutes. James shows off paper tattoos on his shoulders. He tells them about his favorite comic book heroes and television shows. McQuillen asks James' mom how she's doing.

"Ok, I guess. This is the first I've seen him smile for days," she says.

Balloon Angels let little ones take as much time as they need to pick the perfect balloon. They ask about favorite colors and cartoon characters. They coax smiles from children going through tough times.

Volunteer Vicky Hoskins said those smiles draw her to the hospital every week.

"It's hard to see what these families are going through," she said. "If I can do anything to make their day better, it is worth everything."

Year-old "Mikey" Charles Pirtle III has pneumonia. His mom said he usually cries when strangers come into the room but this time, he smiles and reaches to touch a balloon. He holds it tight through a breathing treatment.



Nurses in the emergency department clap as Balloon Angels arrive. The nurses explain which rooms to visit and which to avoid.

In the trauma center, Balloon Angels visit with a young girl lying on a gurney with her neck in a brace. She picks out a tiger balloon.

"That neck brace was becoming an issue. She's pretty uncomfortable," her mom said. "Thanks for the distraction."

A baby with a bandaged arm flaps his good arm as Balloon Angels stand in the doorway.

And four little boys in one family can hardly believe Balloon Angels have come to the emergency department to see them. The mom cannot believe the balloons are free.

McQuillen said there's no doubt God is in the details.

Balloon Angels is a 501(c)3 non-profit charity. She buys balloons from manufacturers at reduced rates. One time, she received a box of purple bowling ball balloons. They were unusual, far different from the butterflies, fish and fire engines she usually gets. But one night, when she knocked on a teenager's door to ask which balloon he'd like, his mom zeroed in on the purple bowling balls. She explained that there were two things her son loved: purple paint in art class at school and his purple bowling ball.

McQuillen has dozens of Balloon Angels stories. Sometimes volunteers develop strong ties with children they see week after week. One little girl in the hospital a long time loved smiley-faced balloons. Balloon Angels kept her room stocked. One of her requests at her funeral was to have balloons instead of flowers. She also asked that after the service those balloons—more than 200 of them—be given to children in the hospital.



"That's why we do what we do," McQuillen said. "These balloons make a difference. It's not unusual for a parent or a nurse to ask that we refill a child's favorite balloon. Parents stop us in parking garages and visiting rooms to thank us for brightening their day."

Brenda O'Bryan, volunteer manager at Kosair Children's Hospital, said Balloon Angels make everyone feel better.

"It's a full circle of caring," she said. "The volunteers love what they do and they make our kids smile. That's worth everything."

For more information about Balloon Angels, go to www.balloonangels.org.