

Winter  
2023

A publication for Hartford HealthCare colleagues

# moments

Enhancing  
a culture of  
**safety**

**Also in this issue:**

- Weather buff tracks storms
- HHC's Power Couple

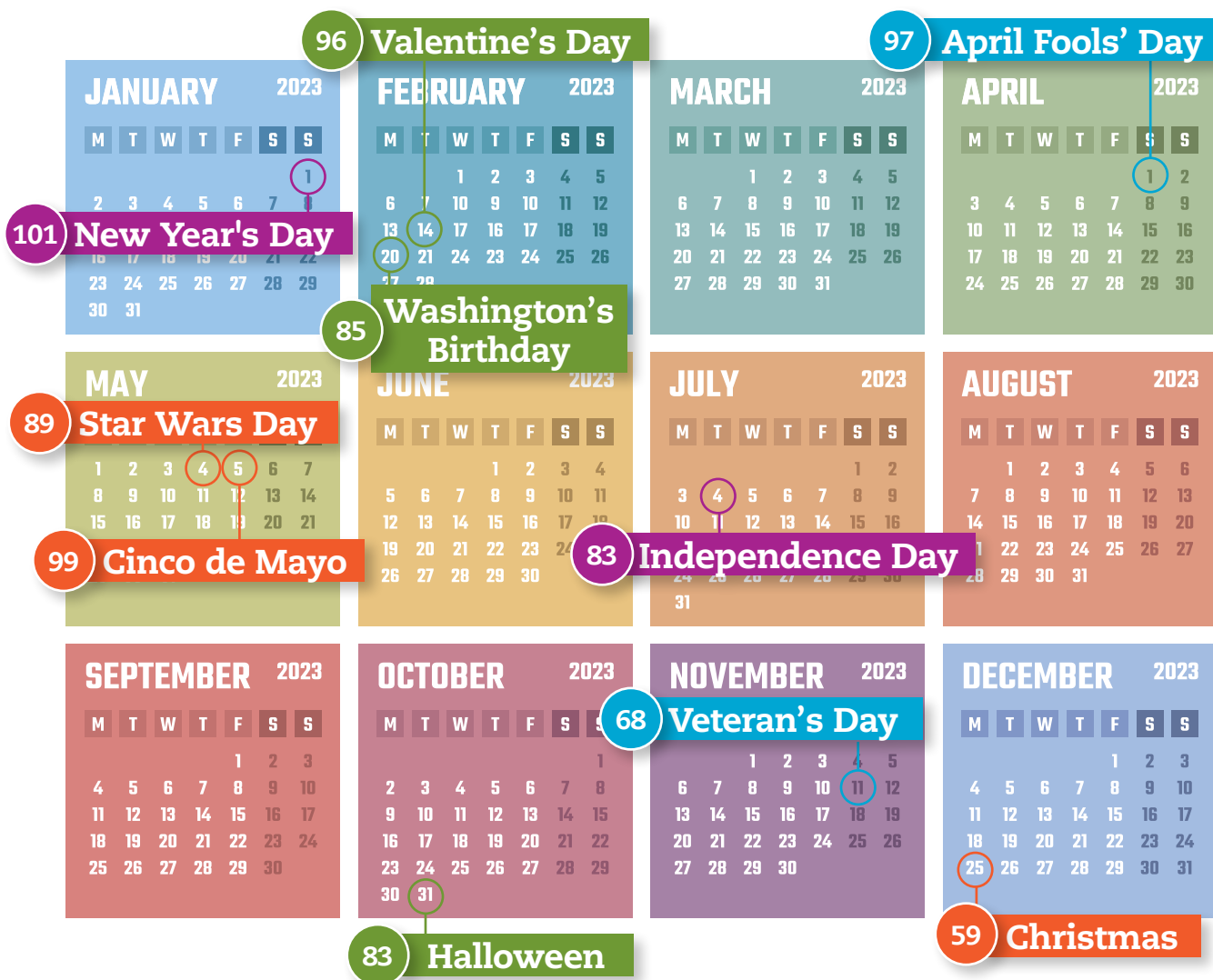
Hartford  
HealthCare





# Happy birthday!

Many colleagues were born on holidays like Christmas or share the celebration with people like George Washington. Whether you tip a birthday margarita on Cinco de Mayo or spend time convincing people it's really your special day on April Fool's Day, we hope you have a happy birthday in 2023! Thanks to Peter Weisenberg, here are the people whose birthday falls on a notable day.



**On the cover:** Craig Plante, a public safety officer at Backus Hospital, poses with his partner, a 3-year-old black female lab named Remi. Read more about their partnership on page 22.

Photo by Jeff Evans



## Dear Colleagues

While this beautiful season evokes a “winter wonderland” for most New Englanders, those of us in healthcare know winter can be challenging. Icy and snow-covered roads make for slick driving. Bitter cold weather is harsh on the old and vulnerable. And yet, because we are here to serve, colleagues report to work — and sometimes sleep there — during routine storms and harrowing blizzards.

It is what we have signed up for. Treacherous weather conditions don't change the fact that people need care, attention and food; rooms and facilities need cleaning; data must continue to flow; supplies must be ordered, routed and stored.

While many of our friends and neighbors eagerly await announcements of their workplace closures whenever snow is forecast, many of our colleagues plan to dig out and head in. It is one of several unique traits of the work we do. (Check out the story on weather events impacting healthcare workers on page 8.)

This winter, I wish you all the joys this special season can bring. And, I am grateful for your sacrifices to care for our patients in hospitals and homes, clinics and centers. During “winter wonderland,” you are the human wonder.

Jeffrey A. Flaks  
President and Chief Executive Officer





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**Editor:** Susan McDonald

**Cover story:** Susan McDonald

**Contributing writers:** Elissa Bass, Kate Carey-Trull, Steve Coates, Keith Fontaine, Haley Guidotti, Tim LeBouthillier, Libby Marino, Shawn Mawhiney, Susan McDonald, Brian Spyros, Robin Stanley, Danielle Swift, Bonnie Tormay, Maggie Werner and Levell Williams

**Photography:** Jeff Evans, Rusty Kimball, Amy Mortensen, Chris Rakoczy

**Graphic Design:** Karen DeFelice Graphic Design

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8



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# Project Shines Light on the Needs of Behavioral Health Patients

In less than two years, the Purple Light Project, named for the Purple Pod in the Hartford Hospital Emergency Department where behavioral health patients find care, has addressed a variety of basic life needs for thousands of people across the state.

**Here's the impressive tally of help offered through the Purple Light Project:**

<b>600</b>	meals for 200 patients	<b>5</b>	weighted blankets for the Natchaug inpatient unit
<b>1,000</b>	blankets	<b>1</b>	tent for a man living in a tent community
<b>30</b>	writing journals for youth	<b>1</b>	pair of hearing aids (\$3,000) for a woman who lost hers and needed group therapy
<b>12</b>	chest binders for transgender youth	<b>100+</b>	hats
<b>600</b>	pairs of ear buds as a reward for attending AA/NA meetings	<b>24</b>	new jackets for the Hartford Hospital Emergency Department
<b>50+</b>	packages underwear	<b>30</b>	pairs shoes for patients being discharged
<b>150+</b>	pairs socks		
<b>20</b>	pairs anti-slip shoes for patients on older adult unit		

In addition, the Project has purchased: cleaning wipes for the homeless; fidgets for patients in the Hartford Hospital Emergency Department; thermal blankets and hand warmers; sweatpants; sweatshirts; and games, decks of cards, art supplies and coloring books for inpatient units. Learn more about Erika Moura, the woman behind the Purple Light Project, on page 38.

—Compiled by Elissa Bass

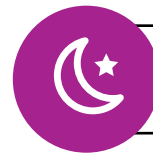
## THE POLL



## Turning the Pages

For anyone who doesn't like frolicking in the snow and cold air, reading by a fireplace might be a favorite winter activity. We asked what genre of books you prefer reading and the following is what you says:





## ‘Unexpectedness’ Makes Night Shifts Fun

By Robin Stanley

Nurse Juliana Gmelch’s day is usually ending just as everyone else’s is beginning.

She is a night nurse on the labor and delivery floor at St. Vincent’s Medical Center, working 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Life on L&D can be unpredictable at any time but the night, for reasons unknown, seems to be when more women go into labor.

“At night, you can have a bunch of women come in all at once about to have their baby in a few minutes,” Gmelch says. “We can have anywhere from one delivery to eight or nine in one shift.”

Gmelch is often the charge nurse on her shifts, responsible for managing labor and delivery, postpartum and the NICU. She makes assignments throughout the shift and ensures the nurses have everything they need to help the night go smoothly. Occasionally, the night shift is without a secretary so Gmelch also checks in new patients.

When she first started at St. Vincent’s in early 2021, Gmelch worked the day shift.

“The days are a bit different because things are more scheduled,” she says. “There are more scheduled inductions for labor, scheduled C-sections and, since offices are open, there are more triages.”

It is the night shift’s responsibility to prep for the morning’s scheduled C-sections when the patients start arriving around 6:15 a.m. And, while offices are closed during the evening, the night shift still sees a fair share of triage cases.

“Usually, it is women with preeclampsia symptoms such as headache and blurry vision or to rule out labor pain,” she says. “During the night, we get a lot of women thinking they are in labor or pre-term labor.”

What Gmelch enjoys about working the night shift is never quite knowing what to expect, which makes things more interesting. Occasionally, the floor will have a “precipitous delivery,” meaning a

woman comes in and the baby is delivered within minutes, with no time for an IV or an epidural.

“On nights, you just have to take what’s handed to you and know what resources you’re going to have for the night,” she says. “The unexpectedness is what makes it fun.”



**Juliana Gmelch is a night nurse on the labor and delivery floor at St. Vincent’s Medical Center, where a shift can see up to 10 babies born.**

Photo by Amy Mortensen



# Weather Buff Watches Storms From Incident Command

By Shawn Mawhiney

Anyone who has worked in healthcare a long time knows the impact of weather — blizzards, hurricanes and floods can all affect patient care, operations and finances.

In Hartford HealthCare's footprint across Connecticut, just a few miles can make the difference between getting several feet of snow or a slushy inch, hurricane-force winds or a breeze.

Having worked at Hartford HealthCare for almost 20 years, I've seen this firsthand as public information officer in the Incident Command Center. I've watched Nor'easters batter Backus Hospital with blizzard conditions while leaving just a dusting at Charlotte Hungerford Hospital, and vice versa.

While some dread these storms, I've always been a weather geek, known to binge watch The Weather Channel as they approach. Growing up, I wanted to be a meteorologist, but wasn't good enough at math so here I am! Luckily, I've been able to tap my love of weather in my role as senior director of communications, and gained a reputation as the system's unofficial meteorologist.



*Senior Director of Communications Shawn Mawhiney loves being in the middle of storms like this hurricane.*

During one hurricane at Backus, my colleague Jeff Evans, who sadly passed away in December, videotaped me standing outside, holding onto a tree branch like my Weather Channel hero Jim Cantore. During just about every snowstorm, I brave the elements, tape measure in hand, to get the snowfall totals. I usually send pictures verifying my measurements to Patrick Turek, senior director of emergency management and security. I'm not sure if it's helpful or if he just humors me!

When there are questions about a storm's track, colleagues and members of senior leadership often ask for my forecast before making key decisions. Sometimes it's personal — like will the Red Sox game be rained out? Others are professional — like should we postpone a weekend event?

I am always eager to share my weather expertise, but have had to sweat out a few forecasts because Connecticut's hilly terrain, valleys and coastline mean just a few miles shift can be dramatic.

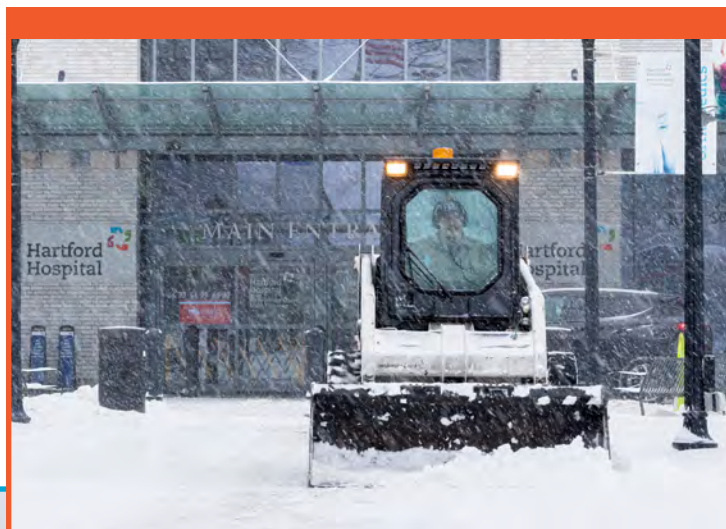
## My most memorable storms at HHC:

- The **Blizzard of 2013** dumped 40 inches of snow in parts of Connecticut, including my home in Colchester.
- **Hurricane Irene** wreaked havoc across HHC, with power outages and trees down everywhere. HHC facilities teams transformed conference rooms into shelters where colleagues slept to ensure we had enough staff to care for patients.
- In 2011, two months after Hurricane Irene, we were hit by a **freak snowstorm before Halloween**. I drove from Backus where there was not even an inch of snow to Colchester, only 15 miles up the road, where there was almost a foot. It got worse farther north and west. Hartford and Northwest regions saw more than 20 inches in some locations. Because of downed trees and power lines, Connecticut declared a state of emergency.
- **Superstorm Sandy** snuck up on us. While it only bordered on a strong tropical storm/weak



hurricane, the angle at which it hit us resulted in massive storm surge and wind. A huge pine tree came down within a foot of my house, although I didn't know it until coming home after more than 24 hours in the Backus Incident Command Center.

- In recent years, there were two hyperlocal weather events impacting only eastern Connecticut. On Sept. 18, 2021, an isolated super cell pounded Backus with more than 6 inches of rain in just a couple hours, resulting in a flood in the front parking lot that damaged more than 40 cars. A band of snow sitting over eastern Connecticut for hours resulted in up to 30 inches in Norwich, with just a few inches elsewhere. This storm was so isolated I can't even find it online.



Now, I invite you to share your work weather memories and photos with Moments Editor Susan McDonald at [susan.mcdonald@hhchealth.org](mailto:susan.mcdonald@hhchealth.org).



## Once-Homeless Colleague Built a Life to Be Proud of

By Levell Williams

Ten years ago, Keishla Rodriguez stood outside Hartford Hospital with her five children, looking at the Hartford HealthCare logo with tears in her eyes.

She had recently escaped an abusive relationship and, turning to her children, she says with foresight, “I’m going to work there.” At the time she didn’t know much about HHC, but she saw a hospital and that was enough.

“Wherever I can connect with someone and let them know it’s going to be okay,” she says. “That’s where I want to be.”

Twelve when she moved with her mother and siblings from Puerto Rico to Springfield, Mass., Rodriguez was beset with problems growing up, from a language barrier and bullying to sexual violence and emotional trauma.

“I lost sight of who Keishla was,” she recalls.

When she later found herself homeless after a physically and verbally abusive relationship, she gathered the strength to seek a better life in Hartford, where an uncle took her in. Here, Rodriguez found help from various community support programs, was recertified as a medical administrative assistant and took a course to become a Spanish medical interpreter.

After a few months, she got a studio apartment and then earned an associate’s degree in social services. She also took “tons of courses that the state offered” through CT Works to advance her professional qualifications, and landed a temporary position at Hartford Hospital. Two years later, she started at the Ayer Neuroscience Institute and, in 2019, transferred to the surgical weight loss program where she is a patient navigator.

Rodriguez is proud of the person she has become — someone who loves her job because she gives others hope, pursues a bachelor’s degree in human services and is buying a house.

“I broke a lot of layers I created when I connected with the right people and the right

friends,” she says of her time at HHC, where a humanistic culture opened her eyes to new ways of learning. “My manager sees me and I see him. We can always learn from each other.”

Outside of her work responsibilities, Rodriguez is involved with Catholic Charities, serves as a member of the HHC Hispanic/Latinx Colleague Resource Group, and sponsors 13 teens who face bullying and problems with their parents. She credited her mother for inspiring her to overcome obstacles and become “the woman I am today.”

Looking at her five children — ages 26, 23, 22, 16 and 12 — tears return to Rodriguez’s eyes, but not for the same reasons. These are tears of pride because they have adopted her generous qualities.

“That’s all I wanted — for them to be good kids,” she says. “We became the family I wanted.”



Keishla Rodriguez, second from left, poses with her children and grandson. From left to right, they are: Leanaly Encarnacion holding Jadiel Encarnacion; Karina Romero; Keishla Romero; Shineyla Romero; and Jacob Encarnacion.





# Skilled crews execute branding projects at St. Vincent's

By Robin Stanley

Fans of home improvement shows are likely familiar with the steps needed for an extreme makeover — something like the one that just wrapped in the lobby of St. Vincent's Medical Center.

After more than a year of design, planning and construction, the project finished in December, creating a lighter, brighter space accented with rich finishes, tile floors and modern furniture.

Plans to align the space's design with the Hartford HealthCare brand began in the winter of 2021 and construction took place in seven phases, each carefully organized and publicized to minimize the impact on patients, visitors and colleagues.

The biggest logistical challenge was closing the main entrance to renovate the front doors. For 12 weeks, patients and visitors were rerouted through the adjacent Cancer Center lobby. Additionally, as with any construction project, supply chain issues caused unexpected delays.

During each phase of construction, the historic artifacts that adorned the lobby, which are integral to the hospital's long history and important to longtime colleagues, were removed and colleagues notified of their whereabouts. Some history was then integrated digitally into a giant 10- by 5-foot video wall and physical artifacts moved to the hallway leading to the chapel.

to improve the customer experience as a whole. Representatives from throughout the hospital participated in workgroups on patient access, front desk workflow and historical artifacts. During weekly construction meetings led by Laura Flavell, regional director of physician and guest relations, each workgroup reported its progress.

## Changing Bridgeport's skyline

While the lobby project focused on branding details inside, another project was in the works to reach travelers on the highway. At the end of September, new signage was installed on St. Vincent's rooftop. Standing more than 18 feet high and nearly 73 feet long, and illuminated at night, the sign is visible beyond the I-95/Route 8 corridor.

Made by Sign Pro Inc., the sign is mounted on two 20-foot metal angles and attached to a 72-foot steel frame. Installation was done in sets of six or seven letters at a time. First, multiple surveys by Sign Pro and the engineer on record ensured the new steel would be placed in the right spots on the roof to be structurally sound.

Then, the steel structure on which the letters are mounted was erected over two days. The letters were lifted by crane to the roof and, once in position, took two hours to install. On the fourth and final day, wiring of the letters was completed.

All of this was done by a crew of eight — two from Sign Pro, four from Berlin Steel and two from A Quick Pick Crane Company. Before installation, Sign Pro coordinated a city permit to have two police officers close down a portion of Hawley Avenue for the hydraulic crane. The crew also monitored the weather and wind to be sure everything was safe for installation. Even with such preparation, the crane had to be shut down on the first day due to the high winds.

*The new illuminated sign atop St. Vincent's Medical Center can be seen from the highway. See drone footage here: <https://vimeo.com/772572042>*





# Hundreds Find Help

Each year, the team at St. Vincent's Medical Center hosts its Medical Mission at Home to provide healthcare and other services to people in need in the community.



## By the numbers

- 321 patients
- 230 volunteers
- 22 providers
- 34 hair cuts
- 160 foot washings
- 19 podiatrist visits
- 100 nutritional counseling sessions
- 99 prescriptions filled
- 106 flu vaccines
- 33 COVID-19 bivalent boosters
- 6 TDaP vaccines
- 4 pneumonia vaccines
- 50 behavioral health screenings



## The team distributed

- 40 blood pressure cuffs
- 83 pairs of glasses
- More than 250 pairs of socks
- 332 coats (244 adult/88 children)
- More than 500 hats, scarves, gloves and mittens
- 259 pairs of shoes (170 adult/89 children)
- More than 500 boxed meals







Photos by Tina Sommers





Hartford HealthCare might be where we work, but when we asked you where you find fun, relaxation or deeper meaning in your lives, we were astonished at the variety of hobbies and activities you pursue in your spare time. Here are a few of those stories, and we'll have more in upcoming issues of *Moments*. [To share your hobby, email susan.mcdonald@hhhealth.org](mailto:susan.mcdonald@hhhealth.org).

## Old Rides Make Her Heart Rev

### Whitney Zajac

#### Operating room nurse, Backus Hospital

Since she was a little girl, Whitney Zajac has had a thing for cars or, technically, a thing for vehicles since her dream ride was a 1950s Chevy pickup. She says she inherited this from her father, who spent a lot of time tinkering under the hoods of various vehicles while she was growing up in Plainfield. She met her future husband—who shares her passion—at a car show. They got married in Vegas while there for a car show. Their daughters, Shelby and Sierra, are named after cars.

#### How many vehicles do you own?

We own two “daily” cars we drive to work. I drive a GMC Acadia and my husband drives a Volkswagen Passat. We have four show vehicles: a green 1952 Chevy pickup my husband built for me; a 1938 GMC rat rod he built; a ‘67 Chevrolet Caprice station wagon we call ‘Large Marge,’ and an ‘87 Chevy pickup that’s lifted.

#### Do you compete in car shows or just go for fun?

We love going to shows and travel from New Hampshire to Delaware for them. Sometimes, we win trophies but we don’t do it for the competition. We probably go to 10 shows a year. We got the station wagon to bring the kids with us.

#### Do you look for specific vehicles or just happen upon them?

We don’t really look for anything specific, although I did tell my husband my dream truck was a 1950s Chevy so he found me one. He actually found it at an

Old Navy in Massachusetts. The shell was being used as a prop in a store and they were selling it. He bought the shell and brought it home to build me the truck. He put a lot of time into it, a lot of late nights and a lot of swearing!

#### Are all of them registered and drivable?

Yes, we drive them. With my truck and his rat rod, we had to have VIN checks to make sure they were legitimate. Then we registered them.

#### Word is you and your truck are kind of famous.

Everyone knows my truck. I get tagged all the time on Facebook and people are always shocked that it’s a woman driving. My husband got me the vanity plate ITS-HERS. Photographers would reach out to use it as a prop, so I started renting it out for photo shoots. It’s surreal to think that people have family photos with my truck in it hanging in their houses. I really like seeing other people get excited about my truck.

—Elissa Bass

*Whitney Zajac’s dream vehicle was always a 1950s Chevy pickup.*

*Photo by Jeff Evans*





# Laughter is the Best Medicine for this APRN

## Angel Rentas, APRN

### Electrophysiology lab, Hartford Hospital

Angel Rentas started stand-up comedy in 1982 to help pay for college tuition. He has since performed at the Boston Comedy Festival, North Carolina Comedy Festival, Coors Light Comedy Competition, Connecticut's Funniest Comics and with the Latino Kings of Comedy. His comedy is based on his experiences in a multicultural Latino family and observations of everyday life.

"You bring humor into your workplace because it's therapeutic, and then you bring your workplace into when you do jokes, and it's an outlet," he says. "It's an outlet for patients, and it's an outlet for providers as well."

#### How did you take this path?

When I was in college, I needed to eat. There was a fashion show, and it didn't have an emcee, and the organizer says to me, "Hey, you're kind of funny, can you go up there and do some jokes?" So, I went up and did a little, and when I was done he gave me 25 bucks. At that time, it was a lot of money for a guy in college so I started doing stand-up.

#### When you were growing up, was there anyone you saw who made you say "I want to try that?"

We used to watch the Ed Sullivan Show, and I saw Red Skelton. But, my uncles introduced me to Richard Pryor on eight-track tapes. I listened to a lot of Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen. Just a lot of different people.

#### Talk about your journey from Puerto Rico to Hartford.

My dad was in the Army and he came here first, to Florida and then Connecticut. He started out with jobs in the picking industry, strawberries and then tobacco. Then he moved onto other jobs. The experience he had, and the experiences we had coming here, they brought up issues you had to deal with and humor for me was a good way to deal with them. I've always used humor to get me out of situations. If somebody's laughing, they can't really beat you up!

**Many comics dedicate their life to that career, but while you find joy in it, your calling is healthcare.**

I wanted a job where I could help and use my skills, and I enjoy people so (nursing) was a natural progression. As far as comedy, you really do need to do it full time but it was good for me. It gave me a lot. I do this joke and say, "When I used to work in emergency, I worked with a guy named Jesus, so when I would walk in (to a patient), I would say I'm Angel, this is Jesus, we're going to take you upstairs."

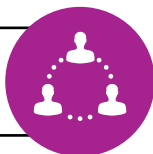
#### Why subject yourself to the hours at the comedy clubs

I'm like a garage band — I come, I get paid. I make a decent living, I have a house, the kids, and everything I want so when I do a show, I try and find an organization that needs money, or a cause, and those are the shows I do.

—Elissa Bass



Angel Rentas finds his groove on stage as a comedian.



## Collector Shares Love of History Through Museum

### Tim LeBouthillier

**Manager of communications and marketing, Behavioral Health Network**

One of my favorite work projects lately has been helping to promote the 200th anniversary of the Institute of Living. It seems this is a perfect fit, as I grew up watching my mother, Patty, found and run a local museum offering the history of Unionville.

#### How did this all start?

It's really a family affair that started in 1984 when my mother, a lifelong Unionville resident, became a founding member of a newly formed history museum housed in a former Carnegie Library building in the historic downtown area.

She remained a board member and, several years ago, invited me to join to help bring in a new generation of people to move the museum into the digital age and appeal to broader audiences. Today, my mother currently serves as president of the board of directors and I am vice president.



Tim and Patty LeBouthillier pose in front of the Unionville Museum.

#### What does the museum showcase?

The nonprofit has grown to a collection of more than 10,000 photographs and historical items, and we have presented more than 80 special exhibitions and numerous special events and programs. It's an exciting time for the museum. We are so fortunate to have an amazing amount of interest from residents in preserving the local history of our town. It has always been my mom's passion and I definitely inherited that from her. We really enjoy it.

#### What do you do?

Together we plan new exhibitions, manage special events, conduct marketing and publicity, and fundraise. Recently, we headed the museum's first capital campaign, raising \$70,000 for the construction of an addition to the building to add a kitchen and handicapped-accessible bathroom. Check it out at [www.unionvillemuseum.org](http://www.unionvillemuseum.org).

#### Why do you do it?

It definitely takes up a lot of free time, it's really a labor of love for us both and it's a lot of fun. We both have collections of antiques and vintage collectibles that inspire exhibitions. From vintage clothes and toys to kitchen utensils and cocktail shakers, some of our possessions usually end up in an exhibit! As my mother says, it's satisfying as collectors to share our treasures with others. The museum allows us this opportunity as we help preserve the rich history of the Farmington Valley.

—Tim LeBouthillier





# Aide is Strokes Ahead of the Competition

## James Vaccaro

### Cafeteria service aide, St. Vincent's Medical Center

Anyone who frequents St. Vincent's Medical Center cafeteria knows James Vaccaro. His smile and laugh are unmistakable and brighten up even the worst days. James joined the team in 2013 as a cafeteria service aide through St. Vincent's Special Needs Services Adult Day Program, which provides services emphasizing recreation, education, social and vocational activities for adults with developmental disabilities. Outside of his life at St. Vincent's, James is a Special Olympics swimmer with too many medals to count.

#### When did you start swimming?

I started swimming in middle school. I do the backstroke, freestyle and relay.

#### Is swimming a hobby or are you on any teams?

I am on the team Milford Operation Mainstream. We practice from January through May at the Academy in Milford.

#### When did you start competing in the Special Olympics?

In middle school. It is once a year. Regionals are at Fairfield University and the summer games are at Southern Connecticut State University. I have won a lot of medals and have them all hanging up in my room. This summer, I won gold in relay, silver in the 200 backstroke and silver in the 100 freestyle.

#### What do you like the most about swimming and competing?

I like meeting new friends and my favorite stroke is freestyle. It makes me happy. We have dance parties at the summer games.

#### What else are you involved in besides swimming?

I do the Best Buddies Program on Zoom. For

the Adult Day Program, I am the editor of the *Off Target News* monthly newsletter and write about the things that each room does (birthdays, events, parties).

**Check out James competing in 2011.** He is the last swimmer toward the end of the video.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFIdFjKerLU>

—Robin Stanley



*James Vaccaro from St. Vincent's Medical Center has won too many swimming medals to count.*



# Revamping Safety, Security and Civility

By Susan McDonald

In a world that seems increasingly uncivilized and unsafe, the public safety team at Hartford HealthCare launched a movement to streamline and reinforce efforts to create safe environments for colleagues and people coming in for care.

HHC Senior System Director of Public Safety and Emergency Management Patrick Turek and his team are reinforcing the sense of security by expanding coverage from hospital-specific crews to a system-wide presence that covers off-site locations and by sharing knowledge that empowers colleagues to be safer and more prepared. Their slogan is “Empowering Expertise, Safer and More Prepared.”

“We have been rallying the organization to transform and improve colleagues’ safety and security experiences,” Turek says, adding that healthcare workers “are 20% more likely than other professions to be subject to workplace violence.”

## Areas of focus

In revamping public safety at HHC, the focus has been on five areas:

- **Service excellence and integration.** Public safety officers — many of whom have law enforcement, corrections or military backgrounds — are being more engaged in their work here, which improves the customer service they provide.
- **Physical security.** The team examined how to create the safest environments for HHC colleagues wherever they work.
- **Empower colleagues.** Sessions such as de-escalation training can help colleagues feel safer and be more aware of their surroundings.

- **Workplace violence protection.** Turek calls this “one of the largest challenges in healthcare.”
- **Enhance protection to areas of high risk.** This can range from avoiding theft in the pharmacy to thwarting infant abduction to preventing violent outbursts in an emergency department.

*“It’s about pausing, resetting and de-escalating. That’s what we’re doing 99% of the time.”*

The work has expanded protection to every HHC location, Turek says.

“All 29,000 colleagues should be afforded appropriate security measures in their workplace,” he notes. “Some areas, like larger medical practices and physical therapy offices, haven’t had any security and called local law enforcement for help. We’re pushing the limits to ensure public safety is a new security advocate for them.”

And, while public safety can help, Turek notes that each colleague must also contribute to this effort especially by being in the moment, avoiding using their cell phones in parking lots, looking out for suspicious activity, or being aware of concerning behaviors in patients, customers, visitors and even colleagues.

## Challenge accepted

President and CEO Jeffrey Flaks and members of his cabinet challenged the public safety team to “think about anything that would keep our people safe,” Turek says. The timing was uncanny, coming around the time of the Middlesex Hospital safety



breach and mall shooting in San Bernardino, CA.

"We started with a sound risk assessment, a thoughtful and planned approach," Turek says.

His team, which maintains bases at each hospital, was expanded with new staff and integrated to become more united instead of operating in silos.

"We automatically get more resources when we pull together, and we're pulling from a deeper bench," Turek says.

Coverage was also added to Hartford HealthCare Medical Group and Hartford HealthCare at Home locations.

"In the more acute care environments, you will see more security and more services. You'll also see the officers doing intermittent rounds so people can get used to seeing them," Turek explains.

"It's been a wholesale change in services, adding pre- and post-acute care areas, where we will have a full-time officer rounding at the practices.

"We can't be everywhere all the time, but when requested, we will be sure to respond."

*Continued on page 20*

## By the numbers



**270**

**Approximate number of full- and part-time public safety officers**

**5**

**Regional public safety directors**

**1-3**

**Managers per region**

**3**

**K-9 handlers**

**1**

**System-wide Public Safety and Emergency Management Council**



During International Association for Healthcare Security and Safety Week, Hartford HealthCare named its Public Safety Officers of the Year. Pictured, from left to right, are: Steve Albert; Paula Steck; Kevin Calitri, award recipient from MidState Medical Center; Gerry Scotella, award recipient from The Hospital of Central Connecticut; Erik Copeland; Josh Freeman; Abrey English, award recipient from Charlotte Hungerford Hospital; Miguel Bermudez, award recipient from Hartford Hospital; Peter Fraser; K9 Samira; Jeff Cozza, award recipient from Hartford Hospital; Edward Shea; Anthony Adiletta, award recipient from St. Vincent's Medical Center; Gary Boivin; and Patrick Turek. Not pictured are Tim Shefer, award recipient from Backus Hospital, and Danny Hayden, award recipient from Windham Hospital.

Photo by Chris Rakoczy



### Shoring up support

Expanding his team is an ongoing task for Turek, as is working with officers to strengthen the compassion and understanding anyone working in healthcare should display.

“We all have to remember that these are people in times of great need and we must rise above situations. They are hurting. It’s not personal,” he stresses. “It’s about pausing, resetting and de-escalating. That’s what we’re doing 99% of the time.”

HHC values provide the perfect frame for these trainings, he adds.

“We must be kind to people. We must do the right thing. We need to recall these values during every interaction,” Turek says.

### Looking ahead

The new HHC headquarters on Pearl Street in Hartford poses a different security challenge for the expanding team due to largely glass first and second floors and the presence of system leadership. Turek expects the team to be called upon to respond to our ever-changing environments and world.

Even so, he says his team is ready to reinforce the sense of security every colleague and patient deserves when they come to an HHC location.

“We are determined to build people’s confidence in security,” Turek says.





## October 29, 2022, third shift

Take a look at one overnight shift to see the variety of things public safety officers are called upon to do.

### STAFF LEVELS

- 5 Backus Hospital (BH)
- 3 Charlotte Hungerford Hospital (CHH)
- 16 Hartford Hospital (HH)
- 8 The Hospital of Central Connecticut (HOCC)
- 3 MidState Medical Center (MSMC)
- 5 St. Vincent's Medical Center (SVMC)
- 3 Windham Hospital (WH)



### 11 PM

### SHIFT STARTS

- 11:34 PM Tirus Denny-Small escorts patient from SVMC ED to Behavioral Health Unit.
- 11:41 PM A patient is discharged from the HH ED and refuses to leave. Officers Jose Rodriguez and Raheem Martinez respond and escort the patient off the property without further issue.
- 12:30 AM CHH officers respond to the ED to help with a drunk patient coming in.
- 1 AM MSMC officers Marquillous Carter, Joe Demichele and Carmelo Roman are dispatched to the ambulance bay to help with an incoming patient who is combative.
- 2:25 AM BH officer Kevin Ledoux searches a room in the psychiatric pod of the emergency room.
- 2:28 AM HOCC officer Joel Rosado responds to medical rapid response for security presence.
- 2:30 AM HH safety officers Kyle Lariviere and Martinez respond to the ED to meet a gunshot wound victim who drove himself to the hospital for care. Hartford police also respond.
- 3:13 AM Officers Lariviere and Martinez are dispatched to HH Bliss 9 to help staff with a patient attempting to leave. The officers successfully verbally deescalate the patient.
- 3:15 AM WH officer Bob Bardelli patrols the outside of the hospital with no issues.
- 4:37 AM An intoxicated man almost drives himself into the ambulance bay doors at the HH ED, and tries to get in through the bay. Four officers — Lariviere, Breanna Bell, Martinez and Rodriguez — respond to the area but the subject drives off. The police are notified.
- 4:40 AM Officers report to the CHH Crisis Unit for a verbal de-escalation.
- 5:05 AM MSMC officers Carter, Demichele and Roman respond to help medical staff medicate an uncooperative patient in the ED.
- 5:40 AM HOCC officers Marcin Adamkiewicz and Alejandro Gonzalez remove an unwanted discharged patient from the property.
- 6:06 AM Jarrett Heyward at SVMC responds to nuclear medicine to open a door.
- 6:14 AM BH officers Jeff Rivera, Steve Duperval, Ed Ledoux and Kevin Ledoux respond to an agitated patient in the ambulance bay of the Emergency Department.



## Going to Work Each Day With His Best Friend

By Bonnie Tormay

Craig Plante and Remi became a team in August 2021 and have been working side by side at Backus Hospital ever since. Plante, a retired corrections captain, started working as a public safety officer for Hartford HealthCare in 2018 as a second career.

### What kind of training do the dogs receive?

Remi was training to work for Homeland Security, but during the height of COVID, her training was put on hold because travel had decreased.

Two years later, I was paired with Remi and that's when her training continued. When she first came home, we had to get to know one another. I brought her to work so she could get used to the sites she would be working, and she received training including leash obedience, getting familiarized

with different surfaces, and on and off elevators.

In addition, Remi completed a seven-week academy involving explosive detecting, recognizing odors, handling, searches, obedience and exercise. Training doesn't end there. She must complete training at least once a month.

### Does Remi have a uniform?

Remi is a smaller Labrador weighing in at 55 pounds. I found that anything I put on her hindered her ability to move around and was more distracting. She doesn't have a particular uniform, but wears a dog collar with her name on it.

### What's her personality like?

Remi is extremely friendly and loves belly rubs. She is full of energy and acts like a puppy when not on the job. I describe her as having a split



personality because when it's time to work there is a definite behavior change. Her nose turns on and she turns into a hunting dog, hunting for odors.

### **How long does she work?**

Overall, we both work a regular schedule, Monday through Friday. The position requires you to be flexible and sometimes we work earlier, later or on weekends for events.

### **What is the most important moment you've experienced on the job?**

In general, it would be being at the right place at the right time. For example, people often need to be seen in the Emergency Department and don't want to go. Once they see Remi, it starts a conversation about how much they love dogs. We end up walking in together and they can get the help they need. This has happened several times.

### **What does Remi do when not working?**

At the end of the work day, Remi goes home with me. I also have a 9-year-old Lab and they enjoy running around the yard and playing together.

### **What will happen to Remi when they retire?**

The capability of the dog determines when they are ready to retire. Work life for each K9 is different based on their breed and type of work they do. Other things to consider is their physical health and whether or not their skills are diminishing. Remi's work life should bring her to around eight to 10 years old. We track everything she does every day, including where and how she is working, what she is doing, trainings and how she reacts to odors.

### **What do you like the most about working with Remi?**

I get to go to work every day with my best friend — it couldn't be any better. I appreciate her partnership. I like the opportunities the K9 team has given me personally and professionally. I go to work with a purpose, and really enjoy meeting colleagues, patients and visitors.

### **What's the most challenging?**

The most challenging thing was setting ground

rules. At first, no one could pet her while she was working because she needed to understand when we were working and not working. When I was able to ease up and let people meet her and be more personable, it was great, except everyone wants to give her a treat, which is now the hardest part of my day.

### **Anything else you'd like to share?**

We are approachable. Please say hi!





## Reports from the Front Lines

The public safety officers across the system are the ones on the front lines when any sort of disturbance or disaster occurs — car fires in the parking lot, skirmishes in the emergency department or unruly patients needing an escort. We asked the regional security managers to share memorable moments from the past year.

### Backus Hospital

On August 8, 2022, at approximately 6 p.m., Backus public safety officer Spencer Way radioed for a non-patient medical response at the Emergency Department entrance. There, a 39-year-old woman had walked in expressing symptoms of pain, and took a seat on a bench just inside the doors to the ED.

Spencer retrieved a wheelchair at this time and radioed the operator to announce a non-patient medical response. This summoned the public safety manager, who arrived about the same time as medical staff from the Emergency Department and the Labor and Delivery Unit. The patient was actively giving birth. Spencer directed foot traffic around the scene while medical staff cared for the patient and her baby's medical needs.

—Submitted by Gen Boas

### Charlotte Hungerford Hospital

On Tuesday, April 26, 2022, Carol Loveland was working the switchboard on third shift when a distraught man called asking "how to kill myself." Carol's training and instincts immediately kicked in and, instead of disregarding the call as a prank, she tried to get some patient information from the man before correctly transferring the call to the Emergency Department Crisis Unit.

Based on information from the Torrington Police Department, the caller hung up and the Crisis Unit staff unsuccessfully attempted to call him back. They then contacted Torrington EMS for a welfare check. Contact was made with the man and he was

transported to the emergency room and the Crisis Unit for further care.

Hospital colleagues and police told Carol that her quick thinking and actions contributed to saving the man's life. Carol's actions underscore how switchboard and public safety teams are committed to their role in the hospital and community, and don't take their duties lightly.

—Submitted by Brian Ohler

### Hartford Hospital

In the morning of August 8, 2022, public safety managers Jeff Cozza and Joe Szymanski were made aware of a bomb threat called into the hospital's switchboard. The caller twice repeated, "There's a bomb in the hospital." When the operator asked if the caller was looking for a patient, he stated, "There's a military bomb in the hospital. It's gonna explode." The operator transferred the call to the security dispatch center, where the man repeated the comment about a bomb.

After calling the Hartford Police Department, Jeff went to the Emergency Department to meet with officers and Joe notified the emergency management team. The police identified the caller as someone who was well known to them, as well as to public safety and emergency department staff at the hospital. Once we realized it was someone with a history of making verbal threats, public safety scaled back response and asked emergency management to share the man's picture with guest relations staff in the lobbies. No one had seen him that day.

Hartford police took a statement from the operator who spoke with the man. He was arrested that night on felony threatening charges. This is an excellent example of the public safety team treating every threat against the hospital, colleagues, patients and visitors seriously.

—Submitted by Peter Fraser



## The Hospital of Central Connecticut

Officer Cory Ouellette demonstrated several H3W Behaviors and HHC Core Values when a stabbing victim entered the Emergency Department. Without hesitation, he left his post and began helping the victim, placing a trash can below the bleeding arm to control the contamination zone and minimize decontamination time. This saved countless minutes for environmental service. Officer Ouellette quickly applied a tourniquet to the victim's arm, effectively controlling the bleeding and allowing nursing staff to properly assess the wound. Within minutes, the patient was rushed into emergency surgery. Later, two trauma surgeons recognized that Officer Ouellette's quick thinking meant the victim needed no blood. With the American Red Cross declaring a "National Blood Crisis" due to a 62% drop in blood donations, his actions may have indirectly saved an unknown life.

—Submitted by Steve Albert

## MidState Medical Center

During the early morning hours of June 3, 2022, public safety officers Carmelo Roman and Marquillous Carter were switching off at the Emergency Department post, and Roman told Carter a man had been in the restroom for several minutes. Carter conducted a welfare check and found him in the bathroom stall. When he still hadn't left the restroom 20 minutes later, Carter sensed something was amiss and went to check again. This time, he found the man unconscious on the floor with drug paraphernalia on the ground. Carter immediately asked the switchboard operator to dispatch medical assistance. Unable to get the man to respond, he broke down the stall door. Medical staff revived the man and brought him to the ED for treatment. Carter's attentiveness helped prevent what could have been a much different outcome for this man.

—Submitted by Erik Copeland

## St. Vincent's Medical Center

A Fairfield police officer was in the Emergency Department on Thursday evening, October 13, 2022, accompanying a prisoner with a stomach

ailment that required him to use the restroom several times. The police officer had removed the handcuffs, allowing the prisoner to use the restroom under supervision and he was then re-secured.

This happened two times without incident, but the third time the prisoner suddenly attempted to run away. As he ran toward the exit doors, chased by the police officer, public safety officer Tirus Denny-Small physically blocked him, preventing the escape. The prisoner continued to struggle and resist being handcuffed. Thanks to the great teamwork, the prisoner was successfully brought under control and secured in handcuffs with no serious injuries to anyone.

Although this was a very fast-moving and violent incident, Tirus reacted decisively and placed himself in potential danger to safeguard others in the Emergency Department and prevent the prisoner from escaping. That kind of action is the true essence of what it means to be a public safety officer, and drew compliments from the Fairfield police chief, who expressed his appreciation for the assistance in making sure a potentially dangerous prisoner did not escape.

—Submitted by Ed Shea

## Windham Hospital

Windham public safety officer Jose Velez finished working a day shift in November 2022, clocked out and began his drive home. Leaving the hospital parking lot, he saw a disabled elderly woman walking toward the hospital. As she stepped off the curb, she fell onto the roadway. Jose immediately pulled over, parking his vehicle in a position to protect the woman.

The woman was not badly injured and stood on her own, explaining that she wanted to be seen in the Emergency Department. She refused an ambulance, and wanted to walk. Jose properly parked his vehicle and walked with the woman until she got safely into the ED.

Jose never reported his actions. Another Windham colleague watched the incident and notified public safety leaders, saying how proud she was that Jose, in his uniform, had displayed every leadership behavior for all to see.

—Submitted by Gen Boas



## Ingraining Care, Respect in Daily Work Lives

In 2022, the system launched pilots of an organizational culture change called Mutual Care Mutual Respect (MCMR) at Backus, Charlotte Hungerford and Hartford hospitals. The program, developed and deployed by members of the human experience team, was created to address trends of incivility and egregious patient conduct toward healthcare workers and underscore the need to take organizational responsibility to support a culture of mutual respect. Signage at the hospitals announced that we will not tolerate: discrimination of any kind; aggressive or violent behavior and language; intentional disruption of the care environment; sexual harassment; weapons; photography or videography within the facilities; and audio recording without the consent of all parties. We asked people at the hospitals what they thought about MCMR. Find out more about Mutual Care Mutual Respect at [www.hartfordhealthcare.org/respect](http://www.hartfordhealthcare.org/respect).



**Jeanna Zavistoski**

*Paramedic, Plainfield Emergency Care Center*

Last week, we had 27 patients on our tracker in a 12-room department. We were triaging folks to see who needed to come in sooner when a gentleman came through the door screaming that he was here first and needed to be seen first. He used a lot of not nice words, saying we were taking patients before him. I let him know the triage process was set up to find out who was more ill, and they should come in before him if they were more emergent than he was. He wasn't taking that as an answer and I says, "Sir, yelling at me is not going to get you in faster. There are patients here who are more ill than you." He did simmer down some and I think the explanation of what triage is and how we work through the process made a big difference in how he viewed his care would go.

*Photo by Jeff Evans*



**Annie MacAulay, MSN**

*Director of emergency services, Charlotte Hungerford Hospital*

I believe the Mutual Care, Mutual Respect initiative shows support and backing from leadership and the system. This shows that we simply won't tolerate displays of violence, disrespect or inappropriate behavior as we care for our community. Staff understand that we are now encouraged to be transparent and share with patients or family that their care is a partnership in in which we all have responsibilities. With the increase in healthcare violence, this is a long-awaited first step of confirmation to the team that we can provide care in a safe and secure environment of healing, excellence and trust.

*Photo by Steve Coates*





## **Macclerly Rios, BSN**

*Assistant nursing manager, Hartford Hospital Emergency Department*

Supporting health and wellness is everyone's responsibility. When we all work together — including patients, families, loved ones and the care team — patients have the best outcomes. Mutual Care, Mutual Respect helps us all understand and really puts into perspective what is most important: a safe, healing environment for our patients and for all. Since this was rolled out at Hartford, we have seen improvement in the interactions between our visitors and care team. In particular, our welcome ambassadors have reported a decrease in the amount of verbal escalations at the greeter desk.

*Photo by Kate Carey-Trull*



## **Anesta Williams**

*Nurse, Backus Hospital*

The relationship between healthcare organizations and their customers is more fraught than ever. Healthcare workers are encountering incivility and egregious patient conduct. This creates distractions and stress, which may impact our ability to provide quality, equitable care to all who come to Hartford HealthCare. As an organization, we have a responsibility to support a culture of mutual respect in order to support access, affordability, equity and excellence. HHC is embarking on an organizational culture change to support the health and wellness of our customers and colleagues by fostering a culture of Mutual Care and Mutual Respect (MCMR). With H3W Leadership behaviors and HHC values as a foundation, MCMR starts with focusing on the work we need to do with each other to create a safe and supportive environment in which to work. Our alignment with these expectations creates a strong foundation for us to address discrimination, harassment, violence and abusive language from our patients, customers and colleagues.

*Photo by Jeff Evans*



## **Brian Ohler**

*Regional director of public safety operations and emergency management  
Charlotte Hungerford Hospital*

If we are going to provide a care setting that is safe, secure and inclusive, there must be an unwavering commitment on behalf of staff, patients and caregivers to treat each other with kindness and respect. It is one thing to verbalize this intent, but action is also needed to codify the efforts that are being done in order to ensure that trust, respect, civility and cooperation remain at the forefront of every telephone conversation, ambulatory visit and inpatient stay. Mutual Care, Mutual Respect is a revolutionary program that will act as a necessary building block, planted firmly in a foundation, to help us in our overall mission to eradicate workplace violence and put an end to the upward trend of verbal and physical assaults on our healthcare colleagues.

*Photo by Steve Coates*



## When the Stakes are High, Every Second Matters

A routine July day took a sudden turn for two colleagues at The Hospital of Central Connecticut, although, if you ask them about it, they'll tell you they were just doing their jobs.

Bobby Bryant, a maintenance mechanic with facilities, was removing a broken bed from the Acute Behavioral Unit (ABU). To exit the unit, he had to go through a small vestibule with two opposing doors, which is when a patient tried to escape.

"As soon as I saw him coming, I tried to shut the door to stop him, but he got through," the 70-year-old says. He was face-to-face with the patient, the bed between them. "He lunged for me. At that point, I put my badge in my pocket so he couldn't grab it. He then jumped on top of the bed."



*"We are trained in crisis intervention and managing aggressive behavior, so we deal with situations like this pretty often."*



Bryant wanted to make sure the patient couldn't get through the second secured door, which led into the Emergency Department and, ultimately, an exit.

"I owned two bars in the 1980s in New Britain, so I was used to dealing with tense situations like this. My focus was to make sure he didn't get out of that room," Bryant says.

Public safety officer Damian Czubat saw what



Damian Czubat, left, and Bobby Bryant helped thwart a patient escape from the Acute Behavioral Unit at The Hospital of Central Connecticut.

was going on from a camera at the nurse's station. Within seconds, he ran into the vestibule to help.

"He flew in there like Batman, went over the bed and was able to get the situation under control," Bryant says.

Czubat's instincts and training kicked in.

"Thankfully, we are trained in crisis intervention and managing aggressive behavior, so we deal with situations like this pretty often," he explains.

After a brief struggle, Czubat subdued the patient and, with the help of colleagues who came running to help, get him back into the ABU.

"I'm just glad nobody was hurt," Bryant says.

—Brian Spyros



# HHC Facilities Earn LGBTQ+ ‘Top Performer’ Status

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation recognized Hartford HealthCare entities for equitable treatment and inclusion of LGBTQ+ patients, visitors and colleagues.

The group designated Backus Hospital, The Hospital of Central Connecticut, Windham Hospital, Charlotte Hungerford Hospital, MidState Medical Center, Natchaug Hospital and the Behavioral Health Network as Healthcare Equality Leaders. They are among 496 hospitals nationwide to earn a perfect score for this achievement. St. Vincent's Medical Center was among 251 hospitals nationwide to earn Top Performer status.

“Patients want to see themselves represented in these spaces to know they will get high-quality, affirming and safe care,” says Derek Fenwick, MD, clinical coordinator of the LGBTQ+ Right Track at the Institute of Living, who helped spearhead the application. “The designation gives a sense of community.”

The application addressed everything from policies to human resources documents and insurance coverage to each facility's physical environment, such as artwork and signage, Dr. Fenwick adds.

The announcement was part of the 15th anniversary of the foundation's Healthcare Equality

Index (HEI), the nation's foremost benchmarking survey of healthcare facilities in this area. It highlights work done across HHC to address diversity, equity and inclusion.

## **HEI evaluates and scores healthcare facilities on detailed criteria under four central pillars:**

- Foundational Policies and Training in LGBTQ+ Patient-Centered Care
- LGBTQ+ Patient Services and Support
- Employee Benefits and Policies
- Patient and Community Engagement

## **Remarkable progress reflected in the 2022 HEI included:**

- 93% of participants met the HEI's training requirements, completing more than 200,000 hours of staff training in LGBTQ+ patient-centered care.
- 82% of facilities earned Leader or Top Performer.
- 99% documented they include “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” in their patient non-discrimination policy.
- 81% offer transgender-inclusive healthcare benefits to employees, up from 75 percent in 2019, the first year it was required to earn Leader status.

—Susan McDonald



*Members of the Hartford HealthCare LGBTQ+ Colleague Resource Group attend many public events across the state to share the work being done here.*



## Ensuring the Joy Stays in Medicine at HHC

The American Medical Association (AMA) recognized Hartford HealthCare for its dedication to ensuring joy, purpose and meaning for its physicians and care teams.

The Joy in Medicine Recognition Program is based on three levels of organizational achievement in prioritizing and investing in clinician well-being. Hartford HealthCare achieved Bronze level recognition this year, one of 28 organizations recognized nationwide.

“This is a great achievement for Hartford HealthCare and we’re honored to be recognized for our commitment to improving the well-being of our workforce,” says Dr. Jennifer Ferrand, HHC’s director of well-being.

### **To qualify for Bronze level recognition, Hartford HealthCare had to meet criteria in five of the following six domains:**

- 1. Commitment.** The system formalized a centralized well-being department with dedicated leadership and staff, as well as regional well-being committees.
- 2. Assessment.** The well-being department conducted an organization-wide burnout assessment.
- 3. Efficiency of the practice environment.** The team measured time spent on “work outside of work” through audits of the electronic medical record. There are plans to use data to inform improvement efforts.
- 4. Leadership.** The system appointed a team to monitor and remove unnecessary administrative burdens.
- 5. Teamwork.** The well-being department made plans to measure teamwork and support implementation of team-based care models.
- 6. Support.** The department launched a peer support program to help clinicians deal with adverse events.

The Joy in Medicine program represents the AMA’s commitment to advancing the science of clinician burnout and empowering health systems to transform clinical practice so all healthcare workers and patients thrive.

Dr. Ferrand clarifies that, while recognition of Hartford HealthCare’s accomplishments is impressive, much work remains.

“We consider the Bronze recognition to be the starting point of our journey, not the end,” she says. “The Joy in Medicine program gives us a roadmap and benchmarks against which to measure our progress, and connects us to other organizations committed to the hard work of cultural transformation.”

Hartford HealthCare’s commitment to well-being is ongoing, and efforts this year will focus on improving the system of care, supporting the mental health of the workforce, and delivering resources and training to leaders, teams and individuals.

—Susan McDonald



*The Joy in Medicine recognition included a nod to the various forms of support being offered to Hartford HealthCare providers.*



## Ayer Specialist Named to SpineLine's '20 Under 40'

SpineLine, a publication of the North American Spine Association, named Ayer Neuroscience Institute neurosurgeon Vijay Yanamadala, MD, to its annual "20 under 40" list.



Vijay Yanamadala, MD

A showcase of the National Association of Spine Specialists' (NASS) brightest young physicians, the group is selected by the SpineLine committee based on accomplishments, community service and philosophy of care.

The system medical director of spine quality, Dr. Yanamadala has published more than 70 peer-reviewed publications, 25 book chapters and 45 abstracts. He earned a 2017 NASS Resident and Fellow Research Award, and, in 2021, performed the first awake spine surgery at Hartford HealthCare. He was also the first surgeon in New England to perform an awake spinal fusion.

Find the SpineLine story here ([https://www.spine-digital.org/spine-digital.org/library/item/september\\_october\\_2022/4042816/](https://www.spine-digital.org/spine-digital.org/spine-digital.org/library/item/september_october_2022/4042816/)).

—Robin Stanley

## Grant recognized at United Nations

Keith Grant, APRN, vice president of operations at Hartford Hospital, was invited to attend the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Grant met with a number of world leaders and other dignitaries, including the prime minister of Jamaica, who expressed his gratitude for the part that Hartford HealthCare played in helping Jamaicans recover from the pandemic. HHC signed an MOU formalizing this important relationship.

—Kate Carey-Trull



Keith Grant poses with dignitaries after attending the United Nations General Assembly session.

## IOL Colleagues Author Pediatric Textbook Chapters



A group of colleagues from the Institute of Living were asked to provide chapters to the most recent edition of the textbook *Behavioral Pediatrics I: Introduction*, fifth edition.

The providers were contacted by an editor from Nova Science Publishers. Faculty and trainees in the IOL's Division of Child and

Adolescent Psychiatry have developed national and international collaborations over the years with their joint work and presentations, and deemed a good fit to offer their expertise in the field.

### The chapters and authors include:

- **Chapter 1. Integrated mental health in primary care offices.** Salma Malik, MD; Sheena Joychan, MD; Julie Goslee, MD; Michael DiBianco, MD; and Lara Addesso, MD
- **Chapter 12. Autism spectrum disorder.** Dr. Malik; Pragya Kalla, DO; and Ashley Sánchez-Ramos, MD.
- **Chapter 17. Major depressive and dysthymic disorders.** Khalid Elzamzamy, MD.
- **Chapter 19. Pediatric bipolar disorder.** Sadiq Naveed, MD.

—Tim LeBouthillier



## Legislature Recognizes Stroke Team

The tireless efforts of members of the Hartford HealthCare stroke team earned them recognition by the state legislature and the 2022 American Heart Association/American Stroke Association Community Conscience Award.

The team includes: Mark Alberts, MD, co-physician-in-chief of the Ayer Neuroscience Institute and chief of neurology at Hartford Hospital; and stroke coordinators Dawn Beland

of Hartford Hospital, Kristen Hickey of the Central Region, and Robyn Hernandez of Charlotte Hungerford Hospital. Included in the recognition were members of CT Stroke Advisory Committee.

Together, these providers worked to refine and advance stroke systems of care across the state, culminating in the passage of an act establishing a state-wide stroke registry.

—Kate Carey-Trull



*The Hartford HealthCare stroke team, from left to right, are: Karen Topalis; Robyn Hernandez; Kristin Hickey; Dawn Beland; Mark Alberts, MD; and state Rep. John Michael Parker; state Rep. William Petit. At right are Charles Wira, MD, and Karin Nystrom, of Yale New Haven Health System, who collaborate with the stroke team on the CT Stroke Advisory Committee.*

## Doctor Earns Community Service Award

The Hartford County Medical Association (HCMA) awarded its 2022 Community Service Award to Cunegundo Vergara, MD, director of the Hartford Hospital Community Health and Adult Primary Care Clinic.

The award was given in recognition of his work in the clinic and decades of advocacy for the disadvantaged. HCMA donated \$1,000 in Dr. Vergara's name to the organization of his choice.

"Your hours of volunteer work and leadership throughout the COVID-19 epidemic and your advocacy of the most vulnerable patients deserves recognition. In addition, you've mentored physicians throughout the years and lead by example. We are honored to have you as part of Hartford County," says Frank Santoro, MD, president-elect of the association.

The work, Dr. Vergara says, would not be possible without the team in place at the clinic.

"The entire staff and providers are all trying to do the right thing for their patients. Moreover, I think we have a self-selected group who are caring individuals and what they do is inherently who they are. I am lucky to work with them on daily basis and to feed off that energy," Dr. Vergara says. "If there is any credit that I can take, I hope what I do and say resonates with as many of the personnel as possible."

—Kate Carey-Trull



**Cunegundo Vergara, MD**



## Champ Turns Basket of Odd Ingredients into a Winning Dish

Excitement — not to mention delicious aromas — filled the air during the St. Vincent's "Chopped" competition in which food and nutrition colleagues contended for one hour to become Chopped Champion.

The participants had to quickly develop a tasty dish with some interesting ingredients and were judged for creativity, originality, presentation and taste. In the basket were: chicken thighs, mango, Brussels sprouts, pineapple Fanta soda, pre-cooked rice and jalapeno potato chips. They had one hour to prepare an entrée to serve four judges.

After taste testing by the judges, Samantha Crossman, who is not a cook, by the way, was dubbed Chopped Champion and her jerk chicken dish was featured in Our Daily Bread Café.

—Danielle Swift



Samantha Crossman earned the status of St. Vincent's Medical Center Chopped Champion with a savory jerk chicken dish.

### Jerk Chicken Stir Fry with Sautéed Vegetables Over Rice Pilaf *Serves four*

#### INGREDIENTS:

1 ¼ cup chicken thighs, cut into pieces  
1 cup precooked white rice  
½ cup Brussels sprouts, sliced  
¼ cup mango chopped  
1 cup pineapple Fanta soda  
¼ cup jalapeno potato chips  
2 Tbsp. soy sauce  
2 Tbsp. brown sugar  
Pinch allspice  
½ cup carrots, sliced  
Olive oil – enough to coat pan twice  
¼ cup bell peppers, chopped  
1 Tbsp. ketchup  
Jamaican spice paste (*Samantha makes her own by mixing Grace fish and meat sauce, Grace browning sauce, Maggie chicken seasoning and Goya Adobo all-purpose seasoning; You can also use jerk seasoning*)  
½ cup onion, chopped  
¼ cup corn  
Salt and pepper to taste

#### DIRECTIONS:

1. Combine soy sauce, brown sugar, allspice, salt, pepper and soda in a bowl. Add chicken to marinate for at least 10 minutes.
2. Boil 4 cups of water in pot and add carrots and Brussel sprouts. Boil until soft and flexible.
3. Heat half olive oil in a pan over medium-high heat and add marinated chicken and bell peppers.
4. When chicken is almost cooked through, add carrots and Brussels sprouts. Cook for about 5 minutes.
5. Add ketchup, rest of soda, soy sauce and Jamaican spice paste to pan, seasoning to taste with salt and pepper. Stir fry hot and fast just until sauce thickens.
6. Add rest of olive oil to another pan and, over medium heat, sauté mango, onion, crushed potato chips and corn until onions start to brown. Add rice and mix together.
7. Put serving of rice mixture on plate and top with chicken mixture.



## It's the Shimers' Time to Shine

After Maria and James Shimer became the first married couple named simultaneously to *Hartford Business Journal's* annual 40 Under Forty list, President and CEO Jeff Flaks dubbed them Hartford HealthCare's "Power Couple."

Let the ribbing commence.

"My family likes to poke fun at each other," says James, 36. "They've enjoyed referring to us as Mr. and Mrs. Power Couple at any opportunity."

Maria, 33, director of Ayer Neuroscience Institute's specialty programs, and James, vice president for strategy and system integration, met in graduate school at George Washington University, where they were both studying health-care administration. He then completed an administrative fellowship at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, and she earned a fellowship at Hartford Hospital in 2014. After completing their fellowships, James joined Maria in Connecticut. They live in West Hartford with their 2-year-old daughter, Alessa, and Sheltie, Fern.

She oversees program development of the centers treating Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis. He helps develop and cascade HHC's strategic direction, while overseeing strategic planning for the regions, networks, institutes and service lines.

And yes, they talk about work at home.

"All the time," Maria says. "We have such a unique advantage, being in the same field, in the same system, and we both love what we do. We help each other be better."

"It's great to be able to spot check each other," James adds. "If I need a second opinion on something, it's great to have someone who knows the industry and the complexities of our organization."

It also makes going to work events fun. "We don't have to bother with introductions.

We already know the same people," they say.

Both look forward to growing in their careers and becoming more involved in HHC's expanding administrative fellowship program, since their experiences had such a deep impact on their professional journeys.

"We both are where we are today because of our mentors," Maria notes "Now, we give back. We both serve as preceptors, and will continue to support the program that provided a foundation to our careers."

They were honored to be named, out of 130 nominations, to the list of statewide movers and shakers, but "doing it as a couple has made it really special," James admits. "We've been on this journey together, so this is equally a celebration of our individual achievements, as well as what we have accomplished together."

"We have a running joke," Maria says. "I told him that I was probably the spot ahead of him at 38th and he was probably 39th."

—Elissa Bass



*James and Maria Shimer were both named to the Hartford Business Journal's annual 40 Under Forty list.*





## Children's Book Message: It's OK to be Different

By Brian Spyros

Gayle Ambrose is the executive assistant to the vice president of operations and vice president of finance in the Central Region but she added another title to her resume last year — author.

Rewind to 2003, Ambrose was looking for a way to help her son, Ryan, after he couldn't join the football team due to weight and age restrictions. She decided to use the painful experience as a teaching moment in a rather unique way — she wrote a book.

"I put a story together to help him emotionally," Ambrose explains. "Kids may listen to bits and pieces of what we say as parents, but I figured with a book, it would be more impactful."

The rough, handwritten book talked about positivity, inclusivity and accepting your differences, all through the eyes of two birds who wanted to be like their feathered friends instead of embracing their individuality. Ambrose's niece illustrated the storyline, and Ryan got a kick out of the book.

"I ended up tucking it away in a box and it sat there for almost two decades," Ambrose says.

*Gayle Ambrose wrote a children's book to help her son deal with a huge disappointment.*

*Photo by Brian Spyros*

She was going through boxes at home in 2022 when she came across the book. Her sister, who is battling breast cancer, encouraged her to get it published.

"My sister looked at me and says 'What are you afraid of? Just do it!'" she laughs.

After connecting with a publishing company, Ambrose's simple act of love became the book titled *Cardinal Rule* in July 2022.

"When I got the first published book, I was beside myself," Ambrose recalls.

The book contains the illustrations her niece originally designed, a dedication to Ambrose's sister and a write-up on Ryan, who is 30 and served in the Army for eight years before taking a job in the medical field.

Instead of calling the book a labor of love, Ambrose refers to it as a piece of her family's history that sends children the important message that, despite obstacles and struggles, life always seems to work itself out. Most importantly, being true to yourself is all that matters.

"At the end of the day, if it can help one other child by making them realize it's OK to be different, that was my goal all along," Ambrose says.





## Erica Moura's Cup Runneth Over

By Elissa Bass

Long before there was a Purple Light Project, Erica Moura was a beacon of hope and comfort.

Growing up in Avon, "I was more focused on my social relationships than my academics," she recalls. "I was the supportive best friend everywhere I went. Back to elementary school, I remember being the one who felt best when I could support others."

It makes sense that she majored in psychology at St. Lawrence University, got a master's in social work from Smith College, and launched a career in counseling and helping others. She was so focused on how others were doing, in fact, that it wasn't until she got to Smith that academics spoke to her.

"That was my awakening," she says. "They spoke my language for the first time in my life. That entire curriculum was my world. I understood who I was like I never had before."

Today, Moura is director of human-centered care and patient experience for the Behavioral Health Network, and founder of the Purple Light Project, which provides support for mental health patients. Funded through donations, an annual auction and 5K, the program meets needs that make a difference in a patient's recovery with such items as basic hygiene products, blankets, hats, food, school supplies and even hearing aids.

### A suicide, a life change

After college, Moura took a job with an adult outpatient organization. She had a large client load of people with severe mental illness, and one died by suicide before she could even schedule their first meeting.

"It really rocked me. Should I have seen risk signs, should I have reached out sooner? It kept me up at night," she remembers. "I felt like the system was setting me up. I didn't feel I could adequately provide the services these patients needed and it scared me. I felt inadequate and ineffective, and



*At some points, it's hard to move in Erica Moura's garage where she stores items donated to help mentally ill patients through the Purple Light Project.*

there was no proper support for me."

This critical moment led her to focus on supporting staff, including being part of a "post-vention" team at the BHN.

"If there is a suicide, I'm one of the people who will go sit with the staff who lost the patient and say, 'I'm so sorry this happened. How can we support you?'" she says.

Starting at the Institute of Living in 2007 and deemed "warm and fuzzy" by Lori Johnson, APRN, director of the Assessment Center and director of behavioral health Care Logistics Center, she was placed in the children's emergency department at Connecticut Children's Medical Center, doing psych evaluations. She did that for 10 years.

### Better able to help

Because of her desire to support staff, however, Moura earned an MBA from Western Governors University to go into administration, noting, "I think supporting staff is at the heart of improving our patient experience. The relationships make Hartford HealthCare so amazing."

Armed with her third degree, she was named manager of Hartford Hospital's Purple Pod in 2018. In 2020, as the mental health crisis exploded during COVID, she watched staff "dipping into their own pockets to provide things for our patients and I thought, 'We can do better.'"

Thus, the Purple Light Project was born. In 2021,



it was extended to all the system's emergency departments. Moura also organized two Purple Light symposiums with speakers and continuing education credits for staff.

"I think Purple Light has been a space and platform to talk about the utter importance of mental health, and that there is not much difference between patients and staff. Humans are humans," Moura says. "My cup gets filled when I can connect with others. Bonus if I can be helpful. I'm most excited when I see teams come together and support each other."

## Turning Personal Struggle into a Career Helping Others

By Maggie Werner

Obese patients struggle with so many barriers, but the one that stands out most to Nickki Yopp is the demeaning way they are often treated.

It's something she understands because, before bariatric surgery, Yopp struggled with her weight her entire life. Being in the shoes of the patients coming into the medical weight loss offices of Taslima Shaikh, MD, helped her be more gracious and compassionate in her role as a patient service coordinator.

A Hartford HealthCare colleague for 16 years, she transitioned from an acute hospital to the medical group for the position, bringing insight others may not have. In 2012, Yopp had bariatric surgery at Hartford HealthCare, but faced a 60-pound weight regain, which is common in bariatric patients.

Dr. Shaikh helped her address the regain through medical weight loss techniques, but it was not just about the results for Yopp, it was about the experience.

"I truly appreciated her considering my feelings and thoughts," Yopp says.

Together, Yopp and the doctor reviewed her medication list, obstacles, prior failures and successes. At the end of the consult, Yopp left

armed with information, new medication and suggestions for meal prep and exercise, all things she never expected.

"The entire time, she was engaged, smiling behind her mask and making me feel like my time was valuable and my health was her biggest concern at that very moment," Yopp says.

Living through the discrimination many obese patients face, she continues, means she more easily recognizes their fears. She would openly let patients know she is a medical weight loss patient herself, hoping it eases their anxieties.

Since her consult, Yopp lost 57 pounds and continues to work on her goals. She also changed jobs, accepting a promotion to corporate executive administrative assistant at the medical group administrative building in Wethersfield. She still pledges, however, to share her positive experiences with other patients.



Nickki Yopp after weight loss surgery, understands the challenges and stigma of obesity.



## New Column Addresses Men's Health Issues

As a clinical health psychologist with the Tallwood Men's Health Center, Valeria Martinez-Kaigi, PhD, knows that men don't like talking about health concerns, much less making and keeping appointments for routine screenings that could save their lives.

To bridge the gap between the providers and the reluctant patients, she started penning a monthly column called *Men's Health Matters* in the fall. It's a natural outlet for her. One of three psychologists in the Connecticut Army National Guard, with a background in journalism, Dr. Martinez-Kaigi has a unique perspective on men's health and mental health. The column spotlights the health issues she's seen impact men most.

"I work on a multidisciplinary medical team to provide psychological, cognitive and behavioral treatments aimed at improving people's health, well-being and quality of life. I have expertise in biological, behavioral, and psychosocial factors of medical conditions and illness prevention," she says. "And I've seen just how important it is to have uncomfortable conversations out in the open with your healthcare providers."

In the first column, she launched into a discussion of men's sexual health with one simple line: "If you are experiencing difficulties with sexual function, well, you are not alone."



Valeria Martinez-Kaigi, PhD

She includes statistics and facts, with commentary that is soothing and gentle.

"Studies show that people usually think they're the only ones experiencing sexual issues. Clearly, that's not the case at all," she says in her first column.

Her expertise is on the way the mind and body work together, and how that affects a person's life and relationships.

"Our sexual response is influenced by the biology of our bodies and brains, our mental health, our social connections, and more," she notes. "Sexual health is complex, and multiple biological, psychological and social factors play a role."

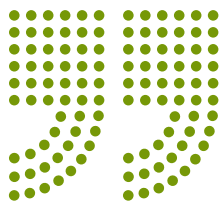
Dr. Martinez-Kaigi then suggests that professional help from any of the experts at Tallwood Men's Health, including herself, can address issues men often cannot solve on their own.

"For example, if hypertension or diabetes is interfering with your sexual stimulation, you'll need proper medical treatment. If depression, anxiety, chronic stress or trauma is part of the issue, a mental health professional can help," she says.

—Susan McDonald

### Follow the column here:

<https://hartfordhealthcare.org/services/tallwood-mens-health/specialties/behavioral-health>







*CHAMPION Committee from the MdState Emergency Department*

## Shining a Light on Mental Wellness in ED

Healthcare is a demanding field and many colleagues carry the stress home after clocking out.

This is especially true for anyone working in an emergency department who see things the average person will never experience. Chelsea Whalen, a nurse and clinical resource leader at MidState Medical Center began to wonder how to normalize the process of being vulnerable and having difficult conversations about these experiences.

“Emergency medicine is an incredibly demanding profession, physically and mentally. We tend to overlook how intense our jobs are, simply because it’s what we love to do. In the midst of all the chaos, we also overlook ourselves and our mental health,” Whalen says.

To help, she launched the CHAMPION Committee for Emergency Department staff to prioritize their mental health and well-being.

CHAMPION committee (which stands for collaboration, healing, awareness, mental health

platform inside our network) meets monthly, offering colleagues a safe place to share their thoughts and experiences, get coping advice, deal with trauma, identify triggers and connect with others who have gone through a similar situation.

Whalen says, “This committee can help people express their emotions in order to heal, process the difficult things they are seeing at work, and develop coping mechanisms so they can effectively care for their future patients.”

In addition, Whalen has organized team-building outings like goat yoga and a Yard Goats baseball game. This, she notes, helps get colleagues out of the work environment to connect on a more positive level.

“We truly are family in this emergency room and everyone is so close. It’s nice to have those experiences outside the ER,” Whalen says.

—Libby Marino

# Seeing Life Through the Lens

In late December, Jeff Evans, the East Region photographer and videographer, died suddenly, leaving a void that could be felt at every level.

President Donna Handley says, “Jeff Evans used his gifts to connect us, to tell our stories, to make us visible to each other and to our wider community.” This is a truth known by anyone moving snow in a blizzard, delivering babies just steps from the emergency room doors or cleaning rooms while chatting with patients. Jeff captured images of each of them through the years.

On these pages, we pay tribute to the artistry of his photography skills, which were only enhanced by his engaging personality and the belief that every person working here has an interesting story to tell. He will be sorely missed.









## Home Health Aide Tells the World He Loves Helping Others

By Bonnie Tormay

When the Hartford HealthCare Independence at Home team wanted to promote the services it offers to people across the state, leaders and marketing communications experts turned to Daniel Adomako to become the face of home care in a new TV commercial.

Adomako became a home health aide with Hartford Healthcare in 2011 after emigrating from his native Ghana, where he was a teacher. We asked him about his work, shooting the commercial and being recognized in public since it aired in the fall.



*Daniel Adomako, PCA, right, looking after his client Raul Grande in his home art studio.*

*Photo by Chris Rakoczy*

### **What is your experience working at Hartford HealthCare?**

It has been a positive experience because my colleagues at Independence at Home work together as a team to help our clients.

### **What do you enjoy most about your role?**

I love taking care of people because it makes me feel good that I've helped another human being so they can live a better life in their home. When I meet clients the first time, I like to understand their needs. It's all about being positive.

### **What was it like doing the commercial?**

My overall experience was great! I wasn't sure what to expect. As soon as I walked through the door, it was like working on a movie set. We filmed at two different locations, a home in Old Lyme and Hartford HealthCare HealthCenter in Waterford.

Val, the makeup artist, was constantly in my face wiping away sweat and made sure I looked good. They would also adjust my uniform and name badge. It was quite the experience and I felt like a movie star!

At some points, I had to do several reshoots to get it perfectly. Shooting the client getting out of the car to an appointment took a lot of takes because it was shot at different angles.

They filmed me driving in the car with the green screen. Four guys were in the car and it was packed with equipment. The scene where the car is driving in front of the health center was filmed using a drone. It was a challenge to drive and not focus on the drone in front of me! That particular shot I had to do over and over as well.

### **Do people recognize you after starring in the commercial?**

Yes! I had friends, old friends, my family, caregivers and their families reaching out to share that they saw me. Another time, I was at Stop & Shop shopping for a client and the cashier noticed and says, "You're the Hartford HealthCare guy from the commercial who loves your job and taking care of people!"

.....  
**See the commercial here!**

<https://vimeo.com/749633500/e30e7838ae>



# BJI Team Returns Runner to Competition

By Kate Carey-Trull

Running and hiking had been stress outlets for Kelly Pabilonia for more than 10 years, and the Hartford Hospital Emergency Department social worker would run after her shifts.

In July 2021, Pabilonia was hiking in the White Mountains, part of her goal to hike the Appalachian Trail, when she slipped and fell. She had to hike out three miles using walking poles as she had broken her ankle and fibula in one leg, and tore the deltoid muscle in one shoulder. She had surgery within a week and was sent to the Hartford Healthcare's Bone & Joint Institute for physical therapy.

She was afraid her running days were behind her.

"I was depressed and anxious," Pabilonia remembers. "Sarah Emlaw, a physical therapist at the Hartford HealthCare Bone & Joint Institute, figuratively wrapped her arms around me. She saw how overwhelming it was for me not to be able to exercise."

Frustrated with her recovery, Pabilonia decided to set a goal to get motivated — competing in a half Ironman race.

Emlaw set Pabilonia up with a nutritionist at the BJI to make sure she was eating enough protein to heal her bones and be strong for exercising, and she started a return to run program. She also saw a behavioral health specialist, who helped her find coping

mechanisms and evaluated her anxiety.

"Sarah really went the extra mile for me," Pabilonia says. "I was able to use the amazing equipment at BJI, such as the treadmill that holds you up, so I could reduce the weight on my ankle, but still be able to run and exercise. She was phenomenal."

The program included running for short intervals, as well as physical therapy sessions at the BJI.

On the one-year anniversary of her ankle injury, Pabilonia headed to the Finger Lakes in New York, where she competed in the Musselman half Ironman race, finishing a 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike and 13.1-mile run, for a total of 70.3 miles.

"I went and showed Sarah my medal, I was so excited. It gave me purpose through my recovery to strive for this goal," she says. "I give her half the credit as to why I am healed mentally and physically after this."

***"Sarah really went the extra mile for me... I give her half the credit as to why I am healed mentally and physically after this."***



Hartford Hospital social worker Kelly Pabilonia worked for a year with the Bone & Joint Institute team to return to running after an injury. Here she crosses the finish line of a half Ironman competition.



## Backus Responds to Mental Health Needs of Community

With the opening of a 10-bed, private wing adjacent to its Emergency Department, Backus Hospital took great strides toward addressing the community's increased need for mental health care.

The 3,740-square-foot Behavioral Health Crisis Unit — designed with safety, privacy and comfort in mind — separates Emergency Department patients with physical health issues from behavioral health patients, improving the experience for all.

“Put yourself in a situation where you are having your worst day, and things are not really looking good in your life and you can come to place where you have your own private room, you can have peace and quiet, where you are respected and where you are not telling your story right next to someone behind a curtain,” notes Kyle McClain, MD, Backus’ chief of emergency services. “This is what our community needed and we are rising to the challenge.”

James O’Dea, PhD, senior vice president of the Behavioral Health Network, says there is an explosion of mental health and substance abuse issues nationally and locally, but only four of every 10 patients who need care can get it, even though their conditions are largely treatable.

“This crisis happening right now in our country regarding mental health and substance abuse has never been more compelling,” Dr. O’Dea says. “It’s never been more important for us to create access points for people to get involved in care. This is



about how do we better engage with our patients, find opportunities for them to get to us so we can navigate them through the care that they need.”

The project is part of HHC’s larger investment in behavioral health resources in eastern Connecticut. Just 15 miles up the road, the Behavioral Health Network plans to open a private, residential substance abuse facility in Windham. The Ridge Recovery Center will offer standard addiction services such as detox and group therapy in a residential setting that includes private rooms, meeting space, a gym, walking trails and alternative therapies such as yoga.

—Shawn Mawhiney



*James O’Dea, PhD, senior vice president of the Behavioral Health Network, speaks to those gathered for the opening of the new Behavioral Health Crisis Unit at Backus Hospital.*

Photo by Jeff Evans

## HHC Appoints First Director of Maternal Health Equity



Daileann Hemmings

Life is coming full circle for Daileann Hemmings, who began her healthcare career as a patient care associate in maternity at Hartford Hospital, and now finds herself the first program director of

maternal health equity for the entire system.

“I have two children and feel fortunate that I was afforded great care during my perinatal course,” she says. “Unfortunately, I recognize that, as a Black woman, my ability to safely deliver my babies is not an opportunity that many who look like me are afforded. I am sobered by the devastation and loss experienced by a family and a community when a birthing person dies. I am aware there are potential blind spots we may all have as clinicians.”

Along the way, Hemmings became a registered nurse and joined the hospital’s women’s health unit, where her interest and advocacy for patients with sickle cell disease led her to help create a sickle cell disease pain management protocol in 2013.

More recently, she served as team lead in the intensive care management program at Community Health Network of Connecticut, supporting underserved members of HUSKY’s perinatal population. All jobs demonstrate a deep commitment to addressing health disparities and reducing maternal morbidity and mortality, particularly among women of color.

Vested in community service, Hemmings participates in many community activities including community baby showers that provide prenatal education and support to mothers and families. In her work as an adjunct professor for an undergraduate nursing program, she engaged students and community members in homeless shelters, schools, Boys & Girls clubs and long-term care settings.

Hemmings earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing from the University of Hartford and is pursuing her Doctorate of Nursing Practice at Yale University. She holds certifications as a case manager and lactation counselor.

### **Her goals in joining efforts to reduce maternal mortality already underway at HHC include:**

- Disrupt the healthcare system by using the lens of equity when creating and revising policies and protocols.
- Help HHC become a leader in the nation in our abilities to mitigate maternal health disparities.
- Challenge the status quo by being hyper-focused on a population that is marginalized with a history of mistreatment.
- Infuse the culture with positivity to encourage self-advocacy and empowerment.
- Encourage patients to see the work being done here and have them feel valued.
- Help in creating psychological safety among patients and colleagues as it pertains to conversations about maternal health.

—Susan McDonald







## Hartford Hospital Named Best for Docs in Connecticut

Hartford Hospital has been named the top hospital in Connecticut in Doximity's first-ever "Best Hospitals for Doctors" ranking.

"We are so pleased to be recognized by our own physicians as a top hospital at which to work," says Hartford Hospital President Bimal Patel. "This recognition is a testament to the culture we have created here and the strong collaboration that exists between our medical and support teams.

Having such engaged and talented physicians



is so important as we deliver on our mission of improving the health and healing of the people and communities we serve."

The ranking, compiled from voting from physicians on the platform, measures hospitals on doctor's overall satisfaction, hospital culture, schedule flexibility, and support staff. Voters must have MD or DO credentials and have worked at the hospital in the last 10 years to participate in the survey.

—Steve Coates

## State First for Heart Procedure

A Middletown man who suffered from blackouts due to refractory ventricular tachycardia (VT) walked out of Hartford Hospital feeling much better after a pair of Hartford HealthCare doctors performed the state's first VT ablation using radiation on him.

The procedure, also known as stereotactic body radiation therapy, was performed in late December by electrophysiologist Aneesh Tolat, MD, and radiation oncologist Helaine Bertsch, MD. VT ablation using radiation, the first such treatment performed in the entire region, gives hope to patients like Juno Vu, who have refractory VT and have exhausted other options.

Vu, 44, has had a heart attack and had a defibrillator implanted to help with his condition, in which the heart's electrical signals cause the lower chambers to beat too quickly. Nothing helped until the doctors performed the ablation to block the heart's faulty signals.

—Susan McDonald



*Juno Vu, second from right in front, was the first patient in Connecticut treated with stereotactic body radiation therapy for refractory ventricular tachycardia.*



## Creating a Pipeline for Students to Take the First Steps into a Healthcare Career

We've all been there — juniors and seniors in high school wondering what career path we want to go down in life and finding that, often, it's hard to choose.

The Hospital of Central Connecticut, in partnership with New Britain High School, has devised a way to help students decide if a career in healthcare is right for them.

"The Student Nurse Advancement Pipeline invests in these students by teaching them what it's really like to be in a hospital setting. We introduce them to our culture, lifestyle and help them learn skills in healthcare," says Roxanne Aldi-Quaresima, MSN, APRN, director of nursing in the Central Region, where she also oversees education and development.

Students who take part in the New Britain High School CNA program have the opportunity to come into the hospital during school hours

and shadow clinical instructors or nurses. High school students become certified in basic life support by taking a course through the American Heart Association, learn vital signs and interact with clinical teams and patients from various departments at HOCC.

"It gives students new skills, knowledge and a better understanding of their area of interest," Aldi-Quaresima explains.

Many students in the program can now envision going on to become nurses, doctors and technicians one day thanks to their exposure in the healthcare field at such a young age, Aldi-Quaresima notes. It also benefits HOCC colleagues.

"This pipeline offers an incredible way for our colleagues to bond with these young people and really introduce them to a field that can open so many opportunities for them," she says.

—Libby Marino

## Partnership Narrows Digital Divide for Some Hartford Residents

Hartford HealthCare, the City of Hartford and youth development organization Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) have announced a partnership to refurbish and distribute used computers to underserved Hartford residents.

Under the Digital DividENDS program, HHC is donating 150 laptops, desktops and tablets, with our Information Technology Services team erasing the devices of data and removing their hard drives. Members of Hartford's Youth Service Corps, a city program administered by OPP, will then receive advanced computer hardware training from HHC ITS colleague volunteers. The newly-trained young women and men will refurbish the donated computers, installing new hard drives and other needed parts and

accessories. Upon completing the program, Youth Service Corps members will be eligible for internships with HHC's ITS department.

The City of Hartford will then distribute the refurbished and fully functional computers to senior citizens and first-generation college students in Hartford who do not have access to this technology.

—Steve Coates

**Information technology services colleagues help teach young Hartford residents how to refurbish old computers to distribute to senior citizens and first-generation college students in the city.**

Photo by Chris Rakoczy





Every day, our colleagues do amazing things to benefit patients and the community. Email your moments that matter to [susan.mcdonald@hhhealth.org](mailto:susan.mcdonald@hhhealth.org).

## Sharing the CARE with Colleagues

The Hartford HealthCare Access Center leadership team strives to provide a fun, engaging work environment, including creation of the CARE Team to promote a positive, interactive experience in their office.

Standing for Compassionate Associates Recognizing Everyone, the group is led by Access Center patient service liaisons (PSLs). It started as a way to provide colleagues an opportunity to organize various activities and themes for everyone to enjoy. They meet weekly to propose, plan and execute monthly activities, giving PSLs a way to collaborate and share ideas freely before bringing them to leadership.

Thanks to the CARE Team, PSLs say they look forward to dress-up days and different activities at the office, located on Pearl Street in Hartford. During Pride Month, for example, the team directed colleagues from different departments to wear different colors so, together, they created a human rainbow.

Late last summer, the team implemented a CARE Cart which moves throughout the various departments each day, providing PSLs different items to help brighten their day and relieve any stress. Items in the cart include mints, essential oils and stress balls.

—Haley Guidotti



Tinisha McQuillar, left, and Ebony Peak, pose with the CARE Cart.

## ED Superhero Returns to Running

As chief of emergency medicine at The Hospital of Central Connecticut (HOCC), David Buono, MD, is used to taking care of others but, over the past year, he had to unexpectedly take care of his own health.

In October 2021, the 60-year-old was diagnosed with prostate cancer after a routine PSA.

"I skipped the PSA test the last few years because I thought everything was fine," Dr. Buono says.

Last February, he underwent robotic surgery at HOCC to remove his prostate and, ultimately, the cancer. Dr. Buono, who admittedly doesn't like to sit still, found it challenging to get back to one of

his passions — running.

"I was slower and sore after surgery. I had to build up my endurance to run again and really learn to pace myself," he explains.

Before surgery, Dr. Buono had signed up for the 2022 Hartford Marathon, an event he's run for 20 years. He wasn't going to let his cancer diagnosis stop him.

"I wanted the race to be my focus, not the cancer," he says. Over the seven months leading up to the marathon, he worked hard to get back in shape — preparing for the big day.

At the same time, Dr. Buono was one of a

*Continued on page 49*



*Captain America or Bionic Man? Surgery can't keep David Buono, MD, from running.*

handful of runners chosen to join the Hartford Marathon Foundation's 2022 Inspiration Team, which highlights runners for their strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

He used the opportunity to remind others about the importance of routine health screenings, especially when it comes to cancer.

"I want people to understand that these types of screenings are so important. I had no symptoms prior to my cancer diagnosis, so if it wasn't for the blood test, I would've never known," Dr. Buono says. "I am on a mission to get the word out about screenings for various types of cancers. We have



them for a reason and they save lives."

He successfully ran the Hartford Marathon in October, placing eighth in his age group, to continue what's become a yearly tradition.

"My goal is to be the oldest person running this race one day," Dr. Buono says with a smile.

—Brian Spyros

## Innovative LIFE STAR Nurse Earns Leadership Award

Heather Standish was honored with the 2022 Doris Armstrong Leadership Award, the first given since Armstrong's passing last winter.

For 32 years, Hartford Hospital has given out the award to honor Armstrong's legacy as vice president of nursing there from 1976 to 1990. Nursing leaders who embody her visionary, high-energy and caring leadership style are chosen for the award.

Standish joined the LIFE STAR team in 2007,



*Heather Standish, center, earned the 2022 Doris Armstrong Leadership Nursing Award. With her are, at left, Laura Bailey, MSN, vice president of patient care services in the Hartford Region, and Cheryl Ficara, RN, senior vice president of operations, Hartford Region.*

*Photo by Chris Rakoczy*

progressing from a novice flight nurse to the current nurse director. Her colleagues described her as a true advocate for her patients and authentic in her interactions with staff. She encourages staff to grow and take on projects and leadership behaviors, and provides support and guidance.

Starting as a paramedic in 1995, Standish became a nurse, first working at Backus Hospital before transferring to Hartford Hospital in 2003. At Hartford Hospital, she worked on the cardiothoracic floor and cardiothoracic ICU. All of these experiences prepared her for her dream job of becoming a LIFE STAR flight nurse.

At LIFE STAR and Hartford Hospital, Standish has made significant innovative contributions to the nursing profession. She spearheaded a project enabling LIFE STAR to carry blood products on the helicopters, partnering with Hartford Hospital's transfusion team leadership and LIFE STAR's medical director to develop and implement a well-developed process. The project has helped more than 100 critically ill and injured patients, and earned the team a Full Circle Award and Standish a Nightingale Award for Excellence in Nursing.

Holder of numerous certifications, Standish is leading her team in hosting a "Fundamentals of Critical Care Conference."

—Kate Carey-Trull



## Robotic Hernia Repair Makes Patient's Recovery Easy

For about six years, Thomas Ottone left his hernia untreated; it got worse, larger and more painful until it became debilitating.

He finally went to see general surgeon Chike Chukwumah, MD.

"He came to me with a bilateral complex inguinal scrotal hernia," Dr. Chukwumah recalls, adding that, left untreated, a hernia like this can be life-threatening.

Because Ottone's hernia — which starts as a defect in the abdominal wall muscle — grew so large, his large intestine basically moved into it, becoming trapped.

### More complicated

To repair the hernia, Dr. Chukwumah had to put the large intestine back in what he called its "natural anatomical location." The surgery was tricky, because the large intestine hadn't been in its proper location for some time, and moving it back could have repercussions elsewhere, especially with the lungs, he says. It was important to make sure the move wouldn't put pressure on Ottone's lungs, causing respiratory distress.

"We talked about not doing both sides at once," Dr. Chukwumah says.

Having a robotic surgery option prompted the decision to take care of the entire hernia at once. The robot in the Hartford Hospital operating room gave Dr. Chukwumah the precision needed to safely repair the hernia and push the large intestine back in place, which he did in a five-hour procedure.

Because the procedure was robotic and required only five one-inch incisions on his abdomen, Ottone was discharged the next day, and only needed a few days of over-the-counter pain management.

### Robotic was the best option

"I also do these surgeries laparoscopically, which is also minimally-invasive, but the robot has made these surgeries certainly easier," Dr. Chukwumah notes. "The other option would have been a laparotomy (surgical incision into the abdominal

cavity), which is a big incision. With that, you are looking at three to five days in the hospital. It's a painful surgery, so the recovery can be challenging."

Calling the robot a "game changer" for such procedures, he says, "There is a much lower hernia recurrence with the robot, greatly reduced postoperative complications, functional recovery happens in a quarter of the time, and pain management is non-narcotic."

Two months after surgery, Ottone felt "back to normal," driving and moving well and without pain.

"I feel so much better," he reports. "I shouldn't have waited."

—Elissa Bass



Chike Chukwumah, MD, says the robot is a "game changer" for complex hernia surgeries.

Photo by Chris Rakoczy





Many refer to their units, departments or hospital as “one big family.” Maybe it’s because we spend so much time together, or because some invite relatives to apply because it’s a great place to work. This section is about those connections. We want to hear your story. Email [susan.mcdonald@hhchealth.org](mailto:susan.mcdonald@hhchealth.org).

## A Family History of Sacrificing for Freedom

Although she’s lived in the United States since she was 6 months old, Edna Borchetta grew up connected to her native Dominican Republic and hearing stories of the key role her family played in its history.

Manager of mission services and community impact programs at St. Vincent’s Medical Center, Borchetta especially recalls learning about the bravery of her maternal grandfather, Vicente de la Maza Rosario, in helping to overthrow two murderous dictators terrorizing the Dominican people.

In 1899, at the age of 19, Vicente and 34 others assassinated Ulises “Lilís” Hereaux on the streets of their hometown, Moca. Six decades later, at the age of 81, Vicente was also working behind the scenes of the murder of dictator Rafael Trujillo. His son, Antonio de la Maza, along with several other patriots, ambushed Trujillo on May 30, 1961.

As revenge for the assassination, three of Vicente’s sons were killed. This was just four years after the first of Vicente’s sons was murdered at the behest of Trujillo while he sat in a jail cell framed for murder.

Recently, Borchetta traveled to the Dominican Republic with her 85-year-old mother and two sisters to attend a ceremony honoring her grandfather and inducting him into the Hall of Fame in the province of Espaillat.

“It was an incredible experience to be there because you could feel the pride and the deep sadness as well,” Borchetta says. “I am in awe of what they did for their country and for the bravery that it took at a moment in history when so many people were paralyzed by fear, too afraid to say or do anything against the government.”

“My grandfather was willing to lose his beloved sons — and they were willing to die — in pursuit of freedom.”

—Robin Stanley



Edna Borchetta, far left, poses with her family after her grandfather was inducted into the Hall of Fame in her native province of the Dominican Republic.



## Daughter Perpetuates Dad's Emergency Management Legacy

As director of pediatric services for the Hartford HealthCare Medical Group, Renata Hawks generally thinks of emergencies as a colicky baby at 3 a.m., or a broken bone that needs setting.

Sometimes, though, work life and private life overlap in interesting ways. Last year, Hawks found herself in Michigan, at a conference, ready to introduce HHC colleague Patrick Turek, system director of emergency management, at the International Association of Emergency Management (IAEM) conference.

She wasn't there as a pediatrics specialist, or even for her HHC MG expertise. Hawks was a conference volunteer, representing and perpetuating her father's legacy in emergency management.

The presentation — which Turek could not attend in person due to COVID-19 travel restrictions at the time — was entitled "The Lessons No One Tells You About: How a Healthcare System Leveraged Culture, Leadership and Resources to Respond to COVID-19." Hawk's lessons, however, were a different sort, and went back decades before the pandemic.

"It was very cool that my professional work crossed over into the volunteer work I do to continue the legacy of my dad, who was a founding member of IAEM and gave a great deal of his time and energy to the field of emergency management," Hawks says.

Her father, Robert Bohlmann, CEM (certified emergency manager), died in 2016 after working for years as a volunteer emergency management director for communities across New England, including Simsbury, CT; Wells, Maine; and Plymouth, Mass. He also served as a public safety officer at Bradley International Airport, and police departments in Windsor Locks and Simsbury. His expertise led him to open Nuclear Security Forces Inc., to provide security to the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant.

A year after his death, Hawks began to volunteer on the IAEM's scholarship committee and, two years ago, on the conference committee.

The scholarship committee, which her father helped start, is now named after him. Her connection began a few years before he died, when he enlisted her help at the conference to staff the scholarship auction booth to raise money.

"I quickly learned I had something to offer and enjoyed the opportunity to see my dad in his element. I volunteered my time for two years before becoming a commissioner," Hawk says, adding that she watched her father mingle among the crowd and establish relationships with other emergency managers. "He took great pride in mentoring and helping up and coming emergency managers network."

"When my dad passed in 2016, I knew he had planned for me to continue to be a part of IAEM and help to carry on his legacy in emergency management. In 2017 a scholarship in my father's honor was created for under graduate students perusing a degree in Emergency Management. Each year I take a week off of work in the fall and spend that time volunteering at the annual IAEM conference."

—Susan McDonald

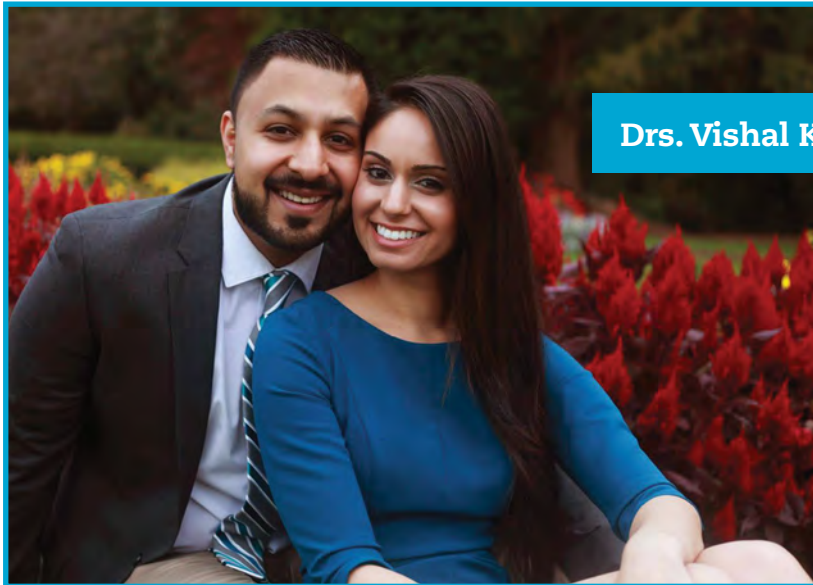


*Renata Hawks of the Hartford HealthCare Medical Group was enlisted to volunteer at a conference with her father, Robert Bohlmann. Years later, she carries on his legacy within the same organization.*



## Work Spouses and Real Spouses

If there's such a thing as too much togetherness, these primary care provider couples haven't experienced it yet. They spend almost all of their time together and we wanted to know how they make it work.



**Drs. Vishal Kochar and Natasha Bajwa**

Before shipping off to medical school in Poland, Drs. Vishal Kochar and Natasha Bajwa met at orientation in Dallas. The first chance they got, they snuck off to be alone. Time together in Poland helped bring them close. They began dating 15 years ago and tied the knot in 2014.

### **What were your first impressions of each other?**

"I just remember he was hilarious. I could not stop laughing," Dr. Bajwa says. "It was my first time living away from home and he helped me adjust."

Dr. Kochar continues, "She was the prettiest girl I saw and she ended up having a really good personality. She was really young, so she didn't know how to cook. All she brought was a huge bag of leftover Halloween candy!"

### **Have you started a family?**

"I was actually pregnant with our first daughter in my final year of residency at the University of Texas. I graduated June 30 and went into labor the next day. We welcomed our second daughter almost two years ago. It feels like we haven't slept in 10 years!" Dr. Bajwa says.

### **What traditions have you started together?**

"Every year on our anniversary we travel to a different destination and buy a souvenir. We've been to places like Hawaii, Mexico and Jamaica," Dr. Kochar says.

"We also celebrate Indian holidays with our girls. We want them to grow up having the cultural background we did. Diwali, the festival of lights, is a big one we celebrate. We dress up, have Indian sweets, light candles and pray," Dr. Bajwa adds.

### **What is it like working together?**

"We chose to work in separate offices to make sure we had some distance in our lives. But, it's reassuring and comforting working together. If I have questions, I send him a message and we shoot ideas off each other," Dr. Bajwa adds.

"It's also been helpful for us to grow together," Dr. Kochar says.

### **What are you most proud of as a couple?**

"We're both the first doctors in our families, which is a big deal in our culture," Dr. Bajwa offers, adding, "We've made our families really proud."



## Drs. Shehrose Chaudry and Mahvish Qazi



Until last July, Drs. Shehrose Chaudry and Mahvish Qazi had a long-distance marriage. They met when their best friends started dating, and got to know each other virtually, talking about medical school and exams before progressing to their daily lives. The couple married in March 2021, moved together in July 2022, and began working as primary care providers for Hartford HealthCare Medical Group soon after.

### How was the long-distance relationship?

"It was very difficult," Dr. Qazi says. "We were both in residency and limited as to how often we could see each other. Some times were better than others, but we made it through."

"We had more free time our third year of residency but we'd still go a whole week without spending time together. Thankfully, we were able to keep in touch through phone calls and messaging," Dr. Chaudry says.

### What has been the best part of your marriage so far?

"I love that we're finally able to live together," Dr. Qazi notes. "Working at the same company and sharing similar interests is an added bonus."

Dr. Chaudry continues, "I essentially married my best friend."

### What do you hope to accomplish as a couple?

"Giving back to the community through primary care is one of my long-term goals," Dr. Chaudry shares. "As a couple, being the best physicians we can be and role models to our younger siblings, friends and family."

—Maggie Werner



# thank you



## THANK YOU NOTES

*“I want to bring to your attention an outstanding nurse in the Emergency Department. I know her only as Elizabeth. She saved my husband’s life. She was assigned to monitor him for stroke signs, and told the doctor she ‘saw something’ in his responses, advocating for further evaluation. The subsequent CT scan showed intracerebral hemorrhage and accompanying intraventricular hemorrhage. Precious time would have been lost had Elizabeth not advocated for my husband. My family is indebted to her for her care and concern.”*

—Frances Hastedt, wife of Backus Hospital patient

*“I was brought to your hospital with Steven-Johnson Syndrome, which is life-threatening but treatable and I was treated very well by your staff, from room cleaners to nurses. I remember the name of the most important person on my medical team — Rolando Hernandez, chaplain. He listened to my fears and hopes, my disquiet and my spiritual beliefs. He did not preach; he did respond gently when I asked questions. He held my hand and returned each day of my stay. I left knowing I had a spiritually life-changing experience, an immensely positive one, in addition to a medical one.”*

—Jon Abbott, Hartford Hospital patient

*“Do you know you have an angel working among you? Her name is Destiny and she works on W2. When I was in the hospital for four days, she went beyond what was required of her, and with much love. She made my stay as comfortable as possible.”*

—Barbara Cronin, The Hospital of Central Connecticut patient



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