

NUN SHE WAITED UNTIL SHE WAS MORE MATURE TO BECOME A CHAPLAIN

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joined Spectrum Health's chaplain staff five years ago, working about 20 hours a week.

"I wanted to be a chaplain when I was 37, but I knew because of my personality I would be deemed too much as a Pollyanna," she said. "I needed suffering and growth so I would not be so overwhelmed with life-and-death situations. I think I was pretty wise to wait."

"By the time I was 48, I knew I had enough maturity to begin that process."

While Tracy maintains an abiding loyalty to her Catholic moorings, the ecumenical spirit her mother, Theresa, taught her remains a guiding force.

"I can't visualize myself going back to the Roman Catholic-only setting," she said. "I've ministered to people with all faiths or no expressed faith. I want to learn different perspectives. It's been a core part of my life. So a hospital ministry is perfect for that."

"We're all going to share the same heaven," she recalls her mother telling her. "Let's get better acquainted here on Earth."

Tracy credits her parents' affirmations for the court jester inside her.

"I was a very wanted and encouraged child," she said.

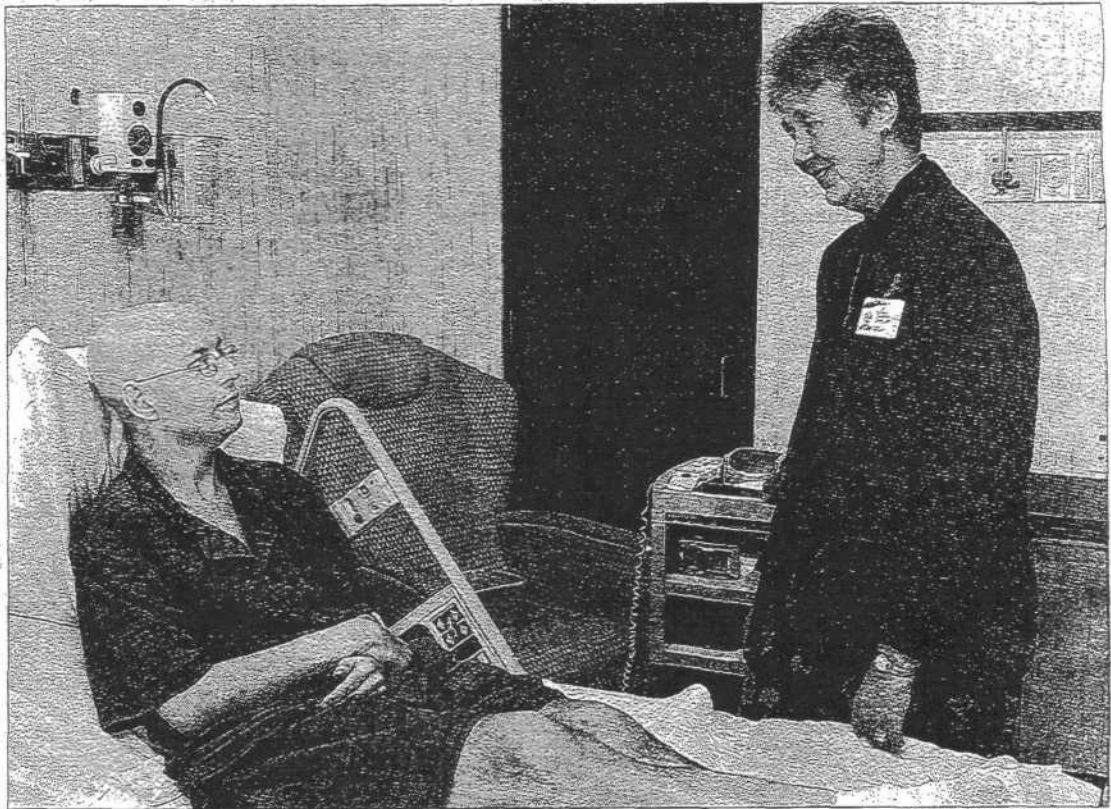
The Detroit native and ardent Pistons fan grew familiar with the ins and outs of hospitals by helping her father, Edward Truszkowski, a radiologist.

While in high school, she also worked as a file clerk at St. Francis Hospital in Hamtramck with the Sylvania Franciscan Sisters.

"I gave EKGs (electrocardiograms) when I was 17," she recalls. "I'm sure I didn't have all the requirements of the law."

Homey, humble and humorous, Tracy has the ability to discern how best to interact with a patient, Spectrum officials said.

"She should be at Saint Mary's (Health Care) because of her Catholic connection, but I'm very grateful she's with us," said Deb Bisel, oncology coordinator at Spectrum Health Butterworth Campus.



PRESS PHOTO/BECCA LEONARD

By his side: Sister Sue Tracy spends time recently visiting Spectrum Health cancer patient Matt Arnold. Tracy mixes compassion and humor to spiritually support patients.

"There are tons of studies on humor and cancer patients, and we find that really does help because it takes the mind away from the anxiety they feel and it releases endorphins, which heal the body."

'Sister Hug'

Images of a dour nun wearing an imposing black habit are dashed when people meet Tracy. Some patients have nicknamed her "Sister Hug."

Still, Tracy knows she must gauge those times when a prayer is needed more than a punch line.

"There's no place like a hospital where there's the extremes of agony and the ecstasy in one place," she said. "Tenderness and tears are as much a part of this ministry as cheer."

But sometimes those tears discharge a good belly laugh.

"She can lighten the mood in the office when she senses we're facing heavy things, and we face them on a daily basis," said the Rev. Steve VanHeest, pastoral care director for Spectrum Health. "She uses humor

in a way that embraces the pain and loss but lets you know that isn't all there is."

Tracy is a sought-after speaker by cancer support groups.

She averages 75 speaking engagements annually, including the National Cancer Survivors Day in Toledo. Word of mouth is her only method of promotion.

"I'm not seeking it or advertising it," she said. "It just keeps happening, and I love it."

Beth Nelson, program director for Gilda's Club Grand Rapids, said Tracy has spoken regularly to cancer victims and their family members since the support organization opened in 2001.

Popular topics of Tracy's include "Humor 'n' Hee-Hee-Healing: It's Laffter You're After!"

"She's such a big entity," said Nelson. "There are so many horrific things about cancer. It's easier for a person living with cancer if humor is part of their personality, and it's certainly part of Sister Sue's personality. I don't think she

could do it any other way."

Tracy said she has learned to "read" patients' facial expressions first to discern if they might find her openness and humor off-putting.

"I have to admit if I were looking at me momentarily I'd wonder, 'Is she real?'"

People in cancer circles say she is real indeed. Her spiritual insights garnered her two chapters in the 1996 "Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul" book. And she is currently writing a 90-day devotional for another publisher.

Tracy believes she is alive today because God has ongoing plans for her — and a few more jokes to tell.

It's all part of what she calls the big "C" — Christ — conquering the little "c" — cancer.

"I will never refer to cancer as the big 'C' anymore," she said. "The gift of cancer has given me the privilege of getting to know some incredible people whose courage and resilience to cope with hope and to celebrate life are amazing."

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