

Congratulations National Employee Recognition Award Winners – 2007

All Roads Lead to ... VITAS!

One of the great things about working in hospice is seeing the wonderful diversity of people who have made our work their calling. While our VITAS Values unite us in our work, every one of our nearly 10,000 employees and volunteers has taken a unique road to arrive at VITAS and embrace our Values.



For some, that road has been relatively straight and narrow—from school ... to a job in a related field ... to VITAS. For many of us, however, the road has taken any number of interesting twists and turns.

Our 2007 National Employee Recognition Awards celebrate those fascinating travels, those different paths in life, those roads both less traveled and well-traveled that brought everyone to VITAS.

But our 2007 National Employee Recognition Awards also celebrate the unique roads taken once an employee or volunteer joins VITAS.

We know that, for patients at the end of life, having VITAS as their travel companion makes their journey smoother and more pleasant. And for all employees and volunteers at VITAS, the colleagues who work beside us make our own VITAS journey more enjoyable, more rewarding, more fulfilling.

I invite you to read the VITAS journeys of our National Employee Recognition Award winners, to travel down the road with them as we celebrate our VITAS Values.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tim O'Toole".

Tim O'Toole
VITAS Chief Executive Officer



Cathy Agosti

Volunteer Services Manager, Miami-Dade/Monroe
Award for Excellence in Management

Cathy's Best Makes Everything Better

Cathy Agosti believes she is on this earth for a reason, and that it is no accident that all roads led her to VITAS. As a spiritual traveler, she believes she is right where she belongs.

As volunteer services manager for the Miami-Dade/Monroe program in South Florida, Cathy is always on the move—touting VITAS in the community, finding new volunteers, inspiring current volunteers, solving problems and being the ultimate “matchmaker.”

VITAS nurses stressed? Guess who (Cathy) finds a school of willing massage therapists to ease their tension. A local university starting a mentoring program? Guess who (Cathy) puts the right people together to make it happen, then sticks around to help.

In 1994, Cathy inherited a program with just 30 volunteers and has grown its ranks to more than 200. She appears at schools, churches, temples, community agencies, health fairs, memorial services, senior consortiums—wherever she can share her effervescent enthusiasm for VITAS, a personal story about how the program cared for her father and how inspiring it is to live the VITAS Values.

Cathy doesn't just sign up volunteers—she nourishes, mentors and fights for them.

Then, after 14 years, the inevitable happened: one of Cathy's treasured volunteers became a VITAS patient. Cathy assisted in getting her admitted and made sure she did not die alone.

Not so common was the patient who wanted to be a volunteer. When her doctor told her she was too ill to volunteer, the patient was crushed. She and Cathy brainstormed and came up with a “job.” She wrote inspirational poetry for other patients to read.

“I made weekly visits to pick up the poems to share with our teams, and we developed a friendship,” says Cathy. “She had almost no family, but she helped me realize that you are never alone. There will always be someone there for you.”



Melissa Booth, M Div

Chaplain, San Gabriel Cities

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—Chaplain

Melissa Touches Patients' Hearts with Songs, Laughter

When Melissa Booth came to the office in San Gabriel Cities to fill out an application to be a VITAS chaplain, she was wearing scrubs.

"She looked more like a nurse than a chaplain," remembers Patient Care Administrator Dana Reedy. "She told us she'd been a paramedic and thought that might help her in the hospice field. She spoke Spanish fluently and hoped to provide spiritual care for Spanish-speaking patients and families."

In the last three-and-a-half years, Melissa has lived up to expectations—in unexpected ways. "People may think chaplains fit into a stuffy and boring personality mold," laughs Melissa, who prefers being the chaplain with the "warped sense of humor."

She credits Martha Cruz, RN, one of her former team managers, for helping her forge her own path as a VITAS chaplain—one that allows her to be part of a team that



"enables patients and their families to live as fully as possible while facing their own human finiteness."

In her travels with patients, Melissa has found that music therapy can go places mere mortals cannot. She describes a patient named Nina, who responded to almost nothing for three years. When Melissa learned that Nina once loved Protestant hymns, she began singing them to her.

Visit after visit, there was no acknowledgement. Then one day, Nina turned, made eye contact and mouthed the words along with Melissa.

Soon thereafter, Melissa met an elderly man visiting at Nina's bedside. He and Nina had loved one another for 30 years but never married. Now, he wept, Nina was lost to him. Melissa told him how Nina had responded to her singing.

Melissa never saw the man again, but later received a note from him. "I thought about what you said, and played Nina's favorite classical music for her. For the first time in three years, Nina turned and looked directly at me. Such a gift I could not have imagined. Thank you."

Today, when Melissa leaves Nina's room she says, "Nina, I love you." And Nina responds, "I love you, too."

Janet Anderson, LVN, CHPLN

Licensed Vocational Nurse, Coastal Cities

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—LVN

Janet's Radiant Spirit Brings Light into Patients' Lives

Photos of VITAS employees are posted throughout the walls and cubicles of the Coastal Cities program in Torrance, California. One photo that always draws attention is that of Janet Anderson, a licensed vocational nurse on the continuous care team.

"Her short, stylish hair is flecked with gray, and her generous smile leaps from the photo to greet you—even Janet's eyes smile back," says LVN Joan Corpus about her co-worker's distinctive style and radiant personality.

Janet is so positive, in fact, and so committed to making a difference in her patients' lives, that nothing deters her from doing her midnight-to-8 a.m. job—not even roaches or rats. She once encountered both in a patient's home.

"The rats and roaches would run freely around the patient's apartment," recounts Joan. "While Janet cared for the patient, she purchased and put out roach and rat traps, and she set out a can of Raid for the patient's family to use when they visited."

In her three years at VITAS, Janet has become known for doing many things that fall outside of her typical LVN duties.

In another case, when she was taking care of an elderly patient who lived alone, she learned that the patient had once been meticulous about cleaning her home. As the patient's health declined, however, her housekeeping fell by the wayside.

Janet scrubbed and buffed the patient's home until it sparkled, explains Joan. She even washed and neatly folded all the patient's laundry.

"When the patient's son visited and saw the home, he was amazed," says Joan. "He was so grateful to Janet—not only for her skilled nursing, but for helping his mother meet her wish of keeping a clean house until the very end."

For Janet, these favors are all in a day's work. "To see the smile of a child or family member when they know you care" is all she needs in return, she claims, flashing one of her attention-grabbing smiles.



Robin Burmann, RN

Milwaukee

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—RN

For Robin, Every Patient is Her Best Patient

All of Robin Burmann's patients are her favorites.

"My team knows that I always have the 'best new patients'—every time! I love them all, and I do everything I can to keep them as comfortable as possible," says the enthusiastic RN.

Robin, who joined VITAS in October 2005, is the only full-time nurse for a three-county area in southern Wisconsin. To say she's adaptable is an understatement, says Kathleen Schneider, MD, medical director for the program.

"Robin cares for both home and nursing home patients," says Dr. Schneider. "Her territory covers urban and rural areas, and she easily adapts to the patient's living situation—whether it is in an inner city homeless shelter or an isolated farm house."

Both Dr. Schneider and Robin recall a patient named Butch who had a challenging condition. To Dr. Schneider, Robin's care of "Butch" demonstrated her colleague's devotion and tenacity.

Butch was a paraplegic and bilateral amputee who had developed severe infections. He lived in a tiny trailer on his family's farm and declined inpatient care or even a hospital bed.

Robin visited Butch each day for wound care. She spoke about it so cheerfully, however, that Dr. Schneider didn't realize the enormity of the task until she made a visit while Robin was cleaning the man's wounds.

"It took Robin two hours each day to clean and dress the wounds, but she had been tackling it each day with her usual upbeat attitude," says Dr. Schneider.

"Butch had the worst wounds I've seen in 19 years of nursing," recalls Robin. "Yet he always smiled and welcomed me into his home. He was so courageous."

If a patient has a need, Robin will do everything possible to meet it. "If Robin can't get it done, it probably just isn't possible," says Dr. Schneider.

"I go home every night knowing I made a difference in someone's life," says Robin. "I got into hospice so I could spend time with patients and their families, and help them through their personal journeys."



Tracy Cannizzo, MSW

Social Worker, Chicagoland Northwest

Emmy Philhour Rookie Caregiver of the Year

Rookie Tracy Takes the Wheel, Delivers the Goods

Few people know that Tracy Cannizzo, a social worker in the Chicagoland Northwest program, has a license to drive a "big rig" (an 18-wheeler) in her native New Zealand. She used the license to drive a milk truck to support herself during college.

But once people get to know Tracy, they wouldn't be surprised to learn about this aspect of her past; the tough-yet-tender-hearted Tracy thrives on tackling big challenges and delivering the goods. She did just that when she joined home care Team 703 in May 2007.

"She joined a team that really needed her help," says Team Manager Shari Casselli. The team had been without a social worker for several months, plus it had a number of other staff vacancies.

"Tracy jumped right in," continues Shari. "She not only tied up loose ends on some old patient files, but she worked on new cases, too. She is a bundle of energy who never stops smiling and never says 'No'."

One particular case especially illustrates Tracy's get-in-and-get-to-work attitude. The patient lived at home and, because of her failing health, had not been able to clean. The dirt on the floor was inches deep—thick with dust, dog hair, food and garbage.

"The patient's home posed health and safety risks," says Shari. So Tracy rolled up her sleeves and worked with other members of her team to clean the house. She then helped with the purchase of new bed linens and night gowns for the patient.

Tracy is also highly resourceful and uses the Foundation for End-of-Life Care as much as possible. "I think Tracy has accessed that fund more than any other VITAS social worker!" Shari says with a laugh (although she's not exactly joking).

"From childhood grieving to elder neglect to families with interpersonal relationship problems, there isn't an issue we've handed her that Tracy hasn't been able to address," adds Susan Schlegel, RN.



Rev. Donna Carey

Chaplain, Brevard

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—Chaplain

Donna Sees, Instills Hope for 'Invisible' Patients

Rev. Donna Carey always had a soft spot for society's "invisible" people—those who took a few wrong turns in life and fell out of favor with themselves and their fellow human beings. She likes to help those who many others simply don't "see."

As chaplain for Team 181 in Brevard County, Florida, Donna ministers to some of those "invisible" people. She enjoys attending to all her patients and their families, but there is something extra-special, she claims, about helping those who—by the end of their lives—have reached a dark and hopeless dead-end.

Donna enjoys helping to "lead them back to a place of acceptance and validation, so their final passage is more dignified and peaceful."

"My greatest reward comes when I can step back from my ministry and watch people grow into who God is calling them to be," says Donna.

Donna recalls such a transformation with an embittered cancer patient. He led a life full of anger and abuse, and it showed in his neglected home and surly demeanor.

"I just sat with him, comfortable in his presence—because many people would not have been comfortable," explains Donna. This went on for several visits, during which the patient condemned God and spirituality. Then, shortly before he died, he asked to take communion, and Donna gladly obliged.

"My ministry is about validating humanity in all its forms. I try to meet people where they are in their lives and to affirm who they are—no matter *who* they are," she says.

Donna, who has been with VITAS almost six years, is a compassionate advocate for hospice patients and their families.

"When Donna comes into your life, you feel blessed," says Team Manager Kathy Kashow. "She is an exceptional chaplain, but more importantly, she is an incredible human being."

Rev. Donna Carey holds puzzle pieces to represent the individuals who make up her team at VITAS—Team 181.



Lynne Cohen

Executive Assistant, Communications Department

Corporate Office, Miami

VITAS Award for Administrative Staff

From the Top Floor of the Corporate Headquarters, Lynne Makes a Difference

From the 18th floor of the VITAS corporate headquarters in Miami, Florida—about as far from patients, their families and our interdisciplinary teams as one can get—Lynne Cohen makes a difference every day.

Lynne joined VITAS in August 2005 as the executive assistant to Mark Cohen (no relation), senior vice president of communications and public relations. Her many responsibilities include producing the quarterly VITAS telephone directory, and creating the flyers, invitations and memorial service program booklets used by VITAS bereavement managers.

"Lynne's interaction with others is primarily through emails and phone calls," says one admiring bereavement manager. "It takes a special person to be able to communicate without face-to-face contact and still deliver exactly what they request."

In fact, Lynne often delivers more than what her customers request, since they sometimes don't know exactly what they want. A bereavement

manager once called Lynne, wondering how to announce a widower's breakfast support group in a catchy yet sensitive way.

"So I thought for a moment then suggested, 'VITAS invites you to get a little solace with your sunny sides up'," says Lynne, who is known for her quick wit. The bereavement manager loved it...and the support group participants did too.

"Lynne provides prompt and professional work, and she's pleasant, flexible, innovative and cheerful," says Broward County, Florida, Bereavement Services Manager Mircea (Mitch) Husar.

If you catch her on a less-than-cheerful day, it's probably because Lynne's working on the next phone directory update. In the past two years, she has drastically reduced the number of errors in the directory, and she's decreased its printing cost to pennies per book by streamlining its design and format.

Lynne's job at VITAS might not put her in direct contact with her customers, but she takes comfort in knowing that, every day, she makes a difference in people's lives.



Lillian Coughlin, RN

Admissions Nurse, Central Florida

Emmy Philhour Rookie Caregiver of the Year

Lily Tackled First Year at VITAS with Both Hands

If her rookie year is any indication of how the rest of Lillian (Lily) Coughlin's VITAS career will go, they'll have to rename the company Lily's Innovative Hospice Care.

Lily, RN, joined VITAS in November 2006 and has been making friends, wowing co-workers, impressing her supervisors and making a difference for patients and their families ever since.

A patient was actively dying in a hospital emergency room when Lily, a new admissions nurse, got the call. It was her first patient, and everything fell into place: Lily explained VITAS' services, got the family in agreement, had a "do not resuscitate" order signed, obtained prescriptions, ordered home medical equipment, urged family members to head home to receive the delivery, assured the patient that she'd be home soon, then stayed with her...as she passed away before the ambulance arrived to transport her.

Perhaps that experience is what has spurred Lily to "do even better tomorrow."

"Lily consistently checks with her supervisor to see if others on the team need assistance," says Admissions Nurse Gail Slotter. "She is the first to volunteer to help another teammate, and she sends uplifting e-mails to help her team balance the demands of work and life."

"Every Central Florida team manager has expressed appreciation for Lily's ability to plan and execute the smooth transfer of patients to their teams," adds Connie Samuelson, RN, admissions manager. In fact, when they have a difficult case, Lily is the admissions nurse they request.

"The admissions coordinators praise her, her co-workers request that she work with them in their hospitals, the reps ask that she visit their facilities,"

Connie continues. "Lily admitted 252 patients in her first year—10 percent of this large-size program's total."

But Lily isn't motivated by the numbers. She came to do hospice work because she wanted to have a positive effect on those in need. "God gave us two hands," Lily says, "one to help ourselves and one to help others."



Jill Elder, RN, CHPN

Inland Empire

Outstanding Admissions Nurse

Jill is Always Available to Help Patients Pass in Peace

To some, she's an angel. To others, she's a mentor. But to Jill Elder herself, she's just doing her part as a member of the best hospice care team she's ever known.

Jill, an admissions nurse for the Inland Empire program in San Bernardino, California, goes the extra mile for everyone, says Mary Beth Wadding, director of market development. "When you need the job done, you call Jill," she says. "Jill is always available—and I mean always. She always puts our patients first."

As proof of her dedication, Jill has driven to a physician's home on the weekend to pick up a new prescription to better manage a patient's pain. She also helps co-workers by providing extra training and support.

Having joined VITAS in 2005, Jill has helped many families in her travels with the company. One is particularly memorable...

The patient's wife had promised him that he would be able to die at home. But there he was, in the emergency room of a local hospital, with symptoms too intense for his wife to care for him at home. The family felt helpless. Then Jill stepped in.

Jill arranged for the patient to be transported home, called for an urgent delivery of medical equipment, arranged for Intensive Comfort CareSM and picked up his medications at the pharmacy. She stayed with the patient while waiting for the continuous care staff to arrive, although the care wasn't needed—the patient died in peace, surrounded by his family, within two hours.

"I know in my heart you were sent from heaven that Sunday to assist my father on his passage," wrote the patient's son in a letter to Jill. "You were his angel. You helped my dad rest in peace."

To Jill, such experiences are part of what makes her job so special.

"Hospice is a wonderful specialty of nursing that incorporates all I've ever learned in my career. Everywhere I go, I try to make a difference and to bring peoples' suffering to a peaceful end," she says.



Benjamin Cesar V. Fernandez

Certified Home Health Aide, Inland Empire

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—CHHA

No Matter When or Where— Ben Will Be There

Whether he must travel far or just around the corner, Benjamin (Ben) Fernandez is known for “being there” whenever he’s needed—even if it’s during his time off.

“Ben is always willing to help,” Continuous Care Team Manager Blanca Argueta says of her star certified home health aide. Ben has been on her Inland Empire team in San Bernardino, California, since he joined VITAS in February 2006.

“He was once called at 6:30 a.m. on a Saturday to cover for the continuous care staffing coordinator because she was sick. He was there, and it was his day off!” says Blanca.

Ben also volunteers to take care of his team’s more challenging patients. He signs up to help patients who live far out in the mountains or the distant Palm Springs desert, and he willingly takes patients who are considered “difficult”



to deal with or who have challenging family members. More often than not, those patients and family members request that Ben return after he’s visited them.

“Patients and families love him for his dedication and commitment to his work,” says Blanca. She also notes that he volunteers to work on holidays or during his scheduled days off so other members of his team can relax or attend to personal matters.

No task is too cumbersome for Ben. One patient, for example, was a World War II veteran who was wheelchair-bound and had dementia. “I once followed him around the nursing home ward during my entire shift while he looked for Japanese soldiers,” Ben explains. But because of Ben’s obvious dedication to that patient and the trust that grew between them, “I was with him until his final moment,” he says.

“Ben has a great attitude, and he never complains,” says another fan, Amy Delgadillo, continuous care coordinator. “He is pleasant to work with and does whatever he can to help support the team.”

Ryana Goldberger, LCSW

Social Worker, San Diego

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—Social Worker

Like Magic, Ryana Appears— Even During Raging Fires

Even as smoke and flames threatened her own San Diego home during the Southern California firestorms in October 2007, Social Worker Ryana Goldberger was helping VITAS patients evacuate their homes and move to safer havens.

“Her home was being evacuated, but that didn’t matter to Ryana,” says Team 954 Manager Janice Swanner, Ryana’s supervisor. “She first went to our contract facility to help our patients there evacuate, then she went to a patient’s residence to help him pack and relocate because he had no one to help him.”

During that chaos, Ryana determined where each VITAS patient was going and immediately shared that information with the VITAS office. She also called in with frequent reports on conditions in the field, adds Andrew Sweet, a chaplain on Team 954.

“It eased the office staff’s concerns considerably to know that Ryana was out there—coordinating the evacuations, telling us first hand where the fires were heading, and knowing that she herself was still safe,” he said.

Ryana has a gift, in fact, for being where she’s needed at any time, observes Cathy Soderberg, RN, case manager. “It’s almost as if, by magic, she shows up when you need her most, and she’s always on top of the details. She helps our team in any way needed, not just with social service issues.”

Ryana, who has worked at VITAS since 2002, keeps track of her colleagues’ and patients’ birthdays and other anniversaries—bringing them a card, small gift or cake to help celebrate. She also attends the parties and other celebrations that the VITAS contract facilities give for their residents who are VITAS patients.

“And, thanks to Ryana, all of our women patients have beautiful manicures, with pretty, painted nails to brighten their day,” reports registered nurse and teammate, Debra Hall. Ryana herself spends time with the patients—buffing and polishing.

“Ryana makes a difference every day to everyone around her, whether it’s patients, their families, co-workers or contracted facility staff,” says Janice. She is simply magical.



Lucinda B. Gormes

Volunteer, Northern Virginia

Richard Wolf Volunteer Achievement Award

To Ms. Lucinda, With Love

It wasn't until Lucinda Gormes had traveled her entire career path that she found her way to VITAS. Luckily for VITAS, she brought all her professional talents with her.

Lucinda, or "Ms. Lucinda," as she is fondly known, is a VITAS volunteer—but she also has been called a recruiter, a mentor, a mother figure, a VITAS ambassador and the centerpiece of the Northern Virginia volunteer program. Not bad for a retired great-grandmother!

A quintessential businesswoman, Lucinda was personnel coordinator for a national company for 23 years, so she approaches all her volunteer responsibilities as though she were earning a paycheck. She also gives her "free" time to myriad church and civic organizations.

Lucinda discovered VITAS while she was working as a coordinator of health workshops for SPICES, a non-profit organization that helps African Americans lead healthier lifestyles. As part of her job requirement, she attended a VITAS bereavement training seminar. She was so impressed with the presentation, she called to inquire about volunteering.

"Ms. Lucinda mentors everyone, especially me," says VITAS Business Manager/Volunteer Services Manager James Topel. "She helps us fine-tune our business skills and improve our performance. She brings decades of professional management to the Northern Virginia program."

"Ms. Lucinda represents the volunteer program in all team meetings," continues James. "She also helps the chaplain by mailing newsletters, and she takes VITAS brochures with her whenever she goes into the community."

Ms. Lucinda cites the movie *To Sir, With Love* as one that has inspired her in her life and work.

"I love movies where the heroes help people become whatever they can be. 'Sir' (the teacher, played by Sidney Poitier) encouraged and pushed his students," she says with admiration. "I am comfortable helping people in time of grief and distress. When a loved one passes, one of my gifts is offering encouragement to the survivors."



Shanell Y. Harper, RN, BSN

Coastal Cities

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—RN

Every Patient is Special to Shanell

"When Shanell walks in the door, everyone knows a leader has arrived," says Licensed Vocational Nurse Joan Corpus of her colleague, Registered Nurse Shanell Harper. The two work at the Coastal Cities program in Torrance, California.

Shanell is not only a skilled clinician, but a talented communicator, whose team covers many of Los Angeles' poorest neighborhoods, notes Joan. "She talks easily with patients across Los Angeles' culturally diverse population groups. She addresses everyone in a respectful way, and she's sensitive to their cultural and spiritual needs."

Shanell's success might be due to her background in psychiatric nursing, claims Team Manager Marsha Lee. "She's patient and has a way of letting people know that she understands how they feel."

One particular patient in her mid-40s—a schizophrenic with pelvic cancer—taught Shanell the most about patience. The patient's left leg had been amputated, and she had a large, open lesion on her hip that needed daily dressing changes.

"She was confused and had hallucinations, and she wouldn't let me touch her; she was so paranoid and combative," recalls Shanell. But Shanell visited the patient every day, and after almost three weeks, the patient allowed her to dress the wound.

"The day before she died, the patient asked me if she would get new legs in heaven," says Shanell. "I told her that everything would be new in heaven. She thought for a moment, then said, 'Thank you, I can't wait to get to heaven.' I was touched. I was able to offer her spiritual, emotional and physical comfort during her last hours."

That patient was special to Shanell—but she wasn't the only one.

"One night, a patient's medical equipment malfunctioned, and no one could fix it. The family called Shanell," explains Joan. "Shanell was off that night, but she drove to the patient's home and fixed the problem. When I asked her about that trip, Shanell said, 'That patient is special.'"

To Shanell, every patient is special!

This National Employee Recognition Award winner was not able to attend the ceremony in Fort Lauderdale in April. Her portrait will appear in the July/August issue of Vital Signs.

VITAS Values

- Patients and families come first.
- We take care of each other.
- I'll do my best today and do even better tomorrow.
- I am proud to make a difference.

Jean Klick, RN, CHPN

Philadelphia

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—RN

'Team Mom' Jean Nurtures Patients, Families, Co-Workers

Jean Klick wraps everyone she sees in a warm hug. She holds birthday parties for lonely patients. She takes time to rub a patient's feet and to talk to family members who are having a hard time. She works closely with new team members so they feel comfortable in their jobs.

The mother of four uses her maternal instincts, her nursing skills and hospice knowledge to form a connection between herself and her patients. "Even the most difficult patient cannot resist Jean's warmth," remarks General Manager Rosemary Baughn. "She finds her way into each patient's heart and offers something no medication can give—emotional comfort."

Jean, who joined VITAS in January 2006, single-handedly organized a birthday party for a patient suffering from depression. She brought a cake and card, and rounded up staff at the long term care facility to sing "Happy Birthday." The impromptu party lifted the patient's spirits.

As a highly skilled hospice nurse, Jean also is an educator who is always willing to share her experience to help others. But sometimes, Jean's patients teach her.

"One memorable patient had a difficult life, yet she chose to be happy," Jean recalls. "She taught me to 'accept what God allows.' Seeing her live these words taught me not to worry about situations I cannot change."

"Hospice allows me to connect with patients spiritually and emotionally so I can fully use my nursing skills for their good," says Jean.

Jean's commitment to hospice extends beyond patients and families, observes Rosemary.

"Jean offers her expertise when the team is confronted with a difficult case. She also provides support to those who are stressed or experiencing problems. She is the glue that holds her team together," says Rosemary.

"I'm known as the 'mother' of the team," laughs Jean. "I check-in with team members, to make sure they're okay. VITAS has encouraged me so much; I like encouraging others in return."



Rebecca Linton-Maruna

VITAS Representative, Cleveland

"Bringing Our Brand to New Markets" Award

Becki: It's All About What You Leave Behind



Rebecca (Becki) Linton-Maruna was a rep for another hospice in Cleveland when she heard that VITAS was coming to town.

"I was nervous," she admits. "I knew how wide and deep the VITAS touch was. I was apprehensive."

In typical Becki fashion, she took the bull by the horns and asked VITAS for an interview. Becki came off as polished and professional. She knew the territory, knew the contacts, knew hospice—and by the end of the interview, she knew she wanted to travel with VITAS.

"For every question I had, they had an answer," she says. "I was impressed with VITAS' depth of knowledge, its resources and the opportunities for me to grow with the company."

The day Becki started, she and her general manager, Debra (Deb) Pinkerton, traveled to nearby Columbus to participate in a healthcare conference. "At 10:30 p.m., Becki was still contacting referral sources and differentiating VITAS," Deb recalls. "She never stops promoting us."

"When Becki saw our sales support collateral collection, she was amazed," continues Deb. "She had one brochure to work with in her previous job."

Becki values these marketing tools. "I circle things, I underline, I keep the conversation on track using our collateral," she explains. "People don't always listen to you, but the quality of the product you leave behind indicates the quality of the care you provide. And the quality of our collateral reflects our professionalism."

But it's ultimately the quality of the people who convert a new start into a base program, and Becki witnessed that process in action at a recent meet-and-greet with a newly contracted facility.

"I watched as the people on our team took the initiative, introduced themselves and talked about why they work at VITAS," says Becki. "If our social worker was talking to a facility RN and couldn't answer a question, she brought over a VITAS RN and introduced them to each other."

"We coalesced into a team, and I think we all felt proud to be part of something bigger than ourselves."

Michele D'Emilio-Marcus

Licensed Practical Nurse, Volusia/Flagler

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—LPN

Wearing Multiple Hats Suits Michele Just Fine

Michele D'Emilio-Marcus is a VITAS licensed practical nurse, a CPR instructor and a VITAS volunteer for the Volusia/Flagler program in Florida. She considers each of her roles to be an important part of being a member of the VITAS family.

As an on-call nurse, Michele handles VITAS patient emergencies from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m. throughout 100 square miles of Volusia and Flagler counties. If a patient falls, experiences pain that is out of control, or is failing and not on Intensive Comfort CareSM, Michele is at his or her side, providing comfort, support and reassurance.

"Families need reassurance that they are doing all they can for their loved one," says Michele, who joined VITAS in October 2006. "I can give them that reinforcement."

Providing end-of-life care is second nature to Michele, says Michelle Lucas, LPN, continuous care staffing manager. She experienced Michele's devotion and compassion first hand when her father-in-law was admitted to VITAS.

"Michele showed compassion and empathy not only to him but to me as well," recalls Michelle. "She was there to give me and my family a break. She was also there for his passing, and she gave the family the emotional support and peace of mind that is needed at that time."

When she's not working as a VITAS nurse or pursuing her registered nursing license, Michele volunteers for VITAS. She has donated more than 100 hours—conducting CPR classes so nursing staff can recertify their licensure, sewing lap robes and shawls, and making memory bears.

"One family wanted 10 memory bears, and we didn't have that many volunteers who sewed. I took the loved one's clothing home and made all 10 bears. Once I started cranking out memory bears, I never stopped," Michele says with a laugh. "I just love sewing them."

"The company mission and values are part of Michele's heart," says Home Health Aide Christine Gannon. "I think VITAS runs through her veins!"



Jorge Martinez

Certified Home Health Aide, Miami-Dade/Monroe

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—HHA

Once a VITAS Volunteer, Jorge is Now the First to Volunteer

The patient's wife was his primary caregiver, and she needed a medical procedure that required hospitalization. The patient wanted to remain home; he didn't want to stay in an inpatient hospice unit while she was away. But there was no one else to care for him.

Certified Home Health Aide Jorge Martinez took vacation time to stay with the patient while the man's wife was in the hospital.

"Jorge goes over and above to meet his patients' needs," says Alexandra Jiron, RN, of her teammate.

Jorge is the first to volunteer when a call goes out to bring supplies to a patient, and he's the first to suggest a card or collection for a needy co-worker. After a patient's death, Jorge often keeps in contact with bereaved family members to provide support.

"He is excellent at establishing rapport with patients and families," says Alexandra. "We have patients who won't allow another HHA or even their own family members to bathe them if Jorge is not working. So he'll go on his days off to bathe the patient."

Jorge has been going "over and above" for VITAS patients and their families for nearly 18 years. At the suggestion of a friend, he joined VITAS in October 1990 as a volunteer while studying to become an HHA. Two months later, he was a full-time VITAS employee.

The Colombia native chose hospice out of a desire to help others. "Being able to help patients and their families is very rewarding to me, and I remember all of them with warm feelings," says Jorge.

But the patient he remembers most was also a co-worker. "We worked together for 15 years, and when he got sick and needed our care, our supervisor asked him who he wanted to care for him. He asked for me," Jorge recalls. "It was hard, but I'm glad I did it."

"Jorge is the epitome of what a VITAS HHA should be—compassionate, understanding, and his patients adore him," says Patty Quina, RN, team manager.



Cliff Mielke

Patient Care Secretary, Milwaukee

VITAS Award for Administrative Staff

Team Player Cliff Expands His Role

Cliff Mielke is the glue that holds his team together, adding strength, shape and integrity, especially when the team is under pressure.

Patient care secretaries make sure all team members have the information, supplies and paperwork they need when they attend team meetings and complete each day's visits. They triage calls from patients and families, and escalate problems for resolution when necessary.

An efficient PCS can improve team performance, and for three years as a PCS in Milwaukee, Cliff has shined. His teammates say his quick wit and sense of humor bring a breath of fresh air to Team 852.

When the program made some staffing changes, Cliff moved from the assisted living team to the home care team without missing a beat; then he helped everyone around him adjust to the changes as well.



"You'll never hear Cliff say, 'That isn't my job,'" says Executive Secretary Denece Slosarski. Whether he's smoothing over medical equipment issues with outside vendors or personally delivering extra supplies to an anxious family because it's "on his way home," Cliff refuses to set limits to his job description.

Families recognize Cliff's compassion as readily as his teammates do, and they keep in touch with him even after the death of their loved one. Cliff then relates to his team his conversations with patients' family members because "the team likes to know how families are doing," he says.

Cliff is also learning to be a VITAS volunteer in the program's inpatient unit. So when he's not at work, you might find him sitting by a patient's bedside or answering phones in the unit.

Cliff upholds the VITAS Values not only because they are part of his job but because they are part of his personality. His caring and compassionate nature is a key component in the "glue" that holds his team together.

Deborah Mizell, RN

Admissions Nurse, Broward County

Hugh Westbrook Community Service Award

Deborah Takes Strides Without Ever Leaving Home

Deborah Mizell's family roots are planted deep in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and she nourishes it diligently. In fact, her selfless focus to improve her community made her the perfect candidate for this VITAS award.

Deborah was elected as a delegate to this summer's Democratic National Convention. She is a former member of the Broward County chapter of 100 Black Women. She helped found Broward County's Young Ladies' Development Program to teach disadvantaged young women how to present themselves in the business and social worlds.

An RN, Deborah was the Florida Nurses Association's 2006 Nurse of the Year, and she is helping to organize a local chapter of the National Black Nurses Association.

She is a past Chair of the Board of Directors and also volunteers for the local Sickle Cell Association. As a volunteer for the American Cancer Society, Deborah has organized dinner and breakfast celebrations, personally collected \$1,000 for the local Making Strides Against Cancer walk, handed out t-shirts and currently is serving as a clinical cancer prevention instructor.

In her spare time, Deborah—the mother of three grown children—is a full-time admissions nurse for the Broward program.

Late at work one evening, Admissions Manager Jeff Mack asked an obviously exhausted Deborah how he could help her organize a dinner for cancer survivors. Deborah assured him she was taking care of it herself. "If they can battle and survive breast cancer," she told Jeff, "the least I can do is make sure they feel honored."

A VITAS admissions nurse for seven years, Deborah furthers VITAS' reputation with every community connection she makes. But that's not enough for this healthcare "adventuress."

As daughter of one of the first black physicians in Fort Lauderdale, Deborah knew a formal program was needed to reach people of color in her city who may have cultural biases against hospice.

She convinced her supervisors of the need for—and she then developed—a Community Outreach Program. It is her proudest accomplishment at VITAS.



Wanda Ortiz

Senior Admissions Coordinator, Southeast Admissions Call Center
Outstanding Admissions Coordinator

Wanda's Reassuring Voice Calms Patients, Families

The voice of Wanda Ortiz, senior admissions coordinator for the Southeast Admissions Call Center in Miramar, Florida, is the first that many patients and their families hear when they are referred to VITAS. Her concern and confidence flow sweetly yet strongly through the telephone, calming even those who are most nervous and apprehensive.

"Family members have told me that they were really frightened about hospice until they spoke to Wanda ... her voice is so soft, friendly and reassuring," says Ann Reyes-Noyola, an admissions nurse in the Broward County, Florida, program.

Whether she's speaking to them on the phone, in person or in writing, Wanda reveals a compassionate, understanding and diligent person who is always thinking of others.

"When you speak to Wanda about a particular patient, you can tell by her knowledge of the patient's situation that she truly cares," says Harriett Wade, senior admissions nurse in Broward County.

A stickler for detail, Wanda gathers as much information about patients as she can, such as the name of the person with whom the admissions nurse is to meet, and the patient's physician preference and insurance benefits. And when she's finished relaying that information, she goes one step further.

"Wanda has sent spontaneous text messages or emails to an admissions nurse or other staff member, just to say that she appreciates working with them," remarks Valerie Paikin, a VITAS representative for Broward County.

When she's not gathering patient information, Wanda's often gathering food to help VITAS patients in need. In November 2007, she launched an

office food drive to provide one Broward County family with dinner for the Thanksgiving holiday.

"She collected enough food to feed three families for a week!" exclaims Bonnie Bomarito, the call center's customer service supervisor. Wanda repeated the food drive for Christmas and again had enough to feed three families, which she and several colleagues personally delivered.

Wanda's voice for VITAS, its patients, field staff and customers consistently carries well beyond the walls of the Southeast Admissions Call Center.



Marcos Rejtman, DO

Broward County
**Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—
Team Physician**

Dr. Rejtman Finds 'Something Better' in Hospice

When Marcos Rejtman, DO, was a 28-year-old pre-med student, he watched his grandfather die after a decade of painful yet futile medical treatments.

"When he was lucid, he would sometimes beg to die," recalls Dr. Rejtman. "Hospice was not an option then, so he suffered for several more years before dying. I knew there had to be something better."

Dr. Rejtman found "something better." One day during his third year of medical school, he accompanied his attending physician on hospice rounds.

"We visited an inpatient unit where there was a young man who was obviously terminal," recalls Dr. Rejtman. "He had cancer of the head and neck, and the malignancy had destroyed his face. But there was still a twinkle in his eye.

"I then noticed a straw in his mouth that led to a can of beer, and I thought, 'So that's hospice! Cool! Just let him have his beer!'" says Dr. Rejtman, laughing.

Although he had decided on the spot that he wanted to pursue hospice medicine, he first had to pay his dues. That included years of working as an emergency room and internal medicine physician, which—although admirable jobs—weren't good fits for him.

"I had to participate in 'code blue' procedures that I viewed as cruel and futile," he says. "Hospice offers a much more humane approach to end-of-life care."

Team Manager Wilma Forbes describes Dr. Rejtman, who has worked at VITAS since 2001, as "Superman with x-ray vision and a great bedside manner." She says he sees patients' concerns from all angles and does whatever possible to help them.

Wilma recalls a case in which a patient had shingles that threatened to spread to her eyes. "Dr. Rejtman was so concerned that he called his own ophthalmologist and drove the patient there to ensure she made the appointment." Superman, indeed.



Team 958

San Diego, California

Esther Colliflower Team Award

The Year of the 'Full-Court Press' for Team 958

Pressure has a way of making or breaking a sports team, a family, a VITAS team. The Southern California wildfires of October 2007 put horrific pressure on several VITAS programs.

Once the smoke cleared, the overall results were stronger program operations, teams that served their patients as well as their fellow team members, and dozens of stories of selflessness and heroism. But one team really stood out.

"Team 958 is extraordinarily well-equipped to handle the demanding situation we faced last fall," says Team Chaplain Michelle Tiernan. "Our team is composed of a diverse group of individuals who have taken physical, spiritual and emotional journeys to converge at this place called VITAS."

Team 958 evacuated patients as well as located VITAS patients evacuated by other organizations. They attended to patients' physical and emotional needs. They found missing loved ones and missing medications. They worked short-handed while most of their co-workers were evacuating from their homes, and they pitched in when other programs and other teams were at the ends of their ropes.

Team 958:

Roberta Braudaway, RN

Katherine Brown, RN

John Gaidry, MD, Team Physician

Andrea Garrido, Patient Care Secretary

Ruth Gimeno, HHA

Linda Kirton, RN

Frank Modic, Chaplain Resident

Maria Parada, RN

Angela Rackley, Social Worker

Noelle Ramsey, MSW, Team Manager

Carolina Roman, HHA

Noe Romero, LVN

Donald Taylor, HHA

Melanie Thompson, RN

Michelle Tiernan, Chaplain

Christine Wright, HHA

Team 958 thinks as a team and reacts as a team, whether or not fire is licking at its heels. Chaplain Michelle calls it the team's "full-court press."

When a young mother with pancreatic cancer came on service, the team moved en masse to help her and her family. "We supported the husband, held the mother's hand, walked with the kids, talked with the neighbors—everyone loved, encouraged and actively listened."

The team does no less for its own. When a home health aide's husband was in a car accident, team members visited the hospital, cooked, prayed and covered her shifts. When her husband died, the whole team attended his funeral.

"This team recognizes that sometimes the roads less traveled make all the difference in the lives of our patients and their families," says Michelle.

Team Manager Noelle Ramsey



Corrine Volpe, MSW

Social Worker, Palm Beach County

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—Social Worker

Chef Turned Social Worker: Corrine Now Feeds Peoples' Souls

Corrine Volpe was a chef before she joined VITAS, having cooked her way to executive manager of food production for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. But she wanted something "that mattered more than feeding people."

She started preparing for law school, but learned that her father was terminally ill. She moved to Florida to care for him, and several months later, was by his side when he passed away at home under hospice care. That life-changing experience led her to study for a master's degree in social work.

Corrine joined VITAS in August 2005 as the Palm Beach County, Florida, program's first social work student intern. Her first patient, Belle, didn't like having a stranger sitting by her side to give her family caregiver a break.

"I built a relationship with Belle and earned her trust," says Corrine. "She helped me realize I was exactly where I wanted to be." After graduating in May 2006, she started full-time at VITAS.

Then came Tony, a "hard as nails" veteran resistant to VITAS care. While on VITAS service, he was admitted to the Veteran's Administration nursing home, which caused him to be separated from his beloved Pit Bull, Killer. Corrine knew that Tony saw Killer as his best friend, but the nursing home was reluctant to let Killer visit, fearing he would bring fleas.

Corrine worked with Denise DiGiovanni-Segal, VITAS veterans program manager for Palm Beach County, to arrange a visit between Tony and Killer. It took some persuading—and a thorough cleaning and spraying of Killer—but the nursing home finally agreed to let Killer visit.

"Tony cried and cried when he saw his dog," recalls Denise. "When he returned home, his entire demeanor changed toward the VITAS staff. Corrine is the kind of social worker who can make that type of difference with patients."

"I feel honored and blessed to be able to help patients and their families go through that final journey," says Corrine.



Thom Walker

Administrative Clerk, San Gabriel Cities
Outstanding Customer Service

Thom: 'Resourceful as an Octopus' Responding to Customer Needs

No one has traveled a more winding path to VITAS than San Gabriel Cities Administrative Clerk Thom Walker. Now that he's arrived, however, he has found a new track to follow in life that will benefit hospice patients.

Thom found VITAS in November 2005 through family friend Sherri Taylor, senior director of market development for San Gabriel Cities. Before that, the thirty-something clerk had many jobs, most recently "flipping" houses that he remodeled. He liked the independence of self-employment but wanted more professional direction and stability.

With Sherri's encouragement, Thom took a job at VITAS. "It was rough at first," he admits. "I had never worked in a cubicle before, and daily life in the program was so crazy."

There were times when Thom thought about leaving, but Business Manager Susan Patterson urged him to stay. "Thom has a way with people that draws them to him," she says.

"Susan taught me that there's a method to the apparent madness around here," he says, laughing. In fact, he's grown to become "as resourceful as an octopus" and is quick to respond to customers' needs.

"A patient needed new bed rails," explains VITAS Representative Phyllis Blackmore. "As soon as they arrived, Thom went off to install them. Anything we need done, Thom's response is always 'Yes!'"

Sherri recalls when "a doctor called the office looking for patient information. Rather than transferring the doctor to my voicemail, Thom tracked me down and connected the doctor to me. That quick response so impressed the doctor, he inquired about working for us."

Since joining VITAS, Thom has decided to pursue a career in nursing. "I'm really excited about it," he says. "The second I have my license, I'm running out to help VITAS patients!"

This National Employee Recognition Award winner was not able to attend the ceremony in Fort Lauderdale in April. His portrait will appear in the July/August issue of Vital Signs.

Team 682

New Jersey Shore
Esther Colliflower Team Award

Team 682 Pulls Together, Pulls Out the Stops

When a young woman with head, neck and mouth cancer selected VITAS for hospice care in December 2006, she shifted Team 682 of the New Jersey Shore program into full throttle—testing its resources, support systems and resolve. And the team delivered.



The woman had moved from North Carolina with two young children and a long list of needs. She wanted her children, who had different fathers, to grow up together. She didn't have a home and was staying at a friend's house in an unsafe neighborhood with sporadic hot water supply. Moreover, her Medicaid coverage didn't apply in New Jersey.

"Everyone—including our office staff—helped to resolve this patient's concerns," says Team Manager Sharon Cappello. And they did it before she died after only 47 days on our program.

Everyone pitched in to transfer the patient's insurance, buy her bed linens and clothing, and coordinate the paperwork so one of the children's fathers would get custody of both children. The team even secured funds from the Foundation for End-of-Life Care so the father could fly from his home in Alabama to visit them in New Jersey.

Because of her living conditions, the patient had to move twice—first to a motel, then to an inpatient contract bed. No matter what, Team 682 was there. "Sometimes the patient received four visits a day to ensure her comfort and support," says Sharon.

Team members helped the patient assemble a memory book of photographs for her children. And when the patient died, the team helped the family with burial details, even asking the funeral director to remove the young woman's facial tumor so her loved ones would see her as she wanted to be remembered.

"Team 682 makes my job easier," says General Manager Ann Regan-Jean. "This team always pulls together to do what's right for our patients and their families."

Team Manager Sharon Cappello (center) is flanked by Licensed Practical Nurse Vallie Ann Koren (left) and Patient Care Secretary Tamika Johnson (right).



Team 682:

Medalit Barrueto, HHA
Sharon Cappello, Team Manager
Maureen Carbonara, RN
Leticia Cardenas, HHA
Marie Ferron, HHA
Valerie Francis, RN
Judith Johnson, HHA
Tamika Johnson, Patient Care Secretary
Maima Kargbo, HHA
Vallie Ann Koren, LPN
Teresa Ladeira, RN
Sophia Mensah, HHA
Khadijah Muhammad, HHA
Joanne Petto, Chaplain
Michele Pflieger, HHA
Gayle Pistilli, RN
Melisa Pleconis, Social Worker
Kathleen Sardina, LPN
Prudence Tugman, HHA
Benita Williams, HHA

Debra Vermette, MD

Medical Director, Fort Worth

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—Team Physician

'Dr. Debbie' Comes Home to VITAS

"Caring for hospice patients while being part of a team justifies why I became a doctor, but I never knew I wanted to do this until I actually started doing it! It was a real epiphany for me," claims Debra Vermette, MD, recently named medical director for the Fort Worth, Texas, program.

"Dr. Debbie," as she is known by her teammates, patients and family members, joined VITAS in May 2004 as a part-time physician on a home care team. Her co-workers quickly saw that she was a physician who daily demonstrated the VITAS Values. She doesn't hesitate to spend extra time with patients and their families to offer support and explanations and to calm their fears—even if they are not her assigned patients.

In one situation, a patient and his daughter, who was his primary caregiver, needed guidance in caring for wounds. Dr. Debbie evaluated the patient, and assisted in getting him admitted to the VITAS inpatient

hospice unit for treatment. She consulted with the unit team on the patient's treatment and continued to care for the patient upon his return home.



"Dr. Debbie was so gentle and compassionate with the patient and his daughter in discussing the prognosis of his wound care treatment," says Kari Summers, home care team manager. "She gave her time, expertise and care to help him."

Compassion is a word frequently used when describing Dr. Debbie, who has attained diplomate status with both the American Board of Hospice and Palliative Medicine and the American Board of Family Medicine.

"I hope my colleagues know me for both compassion and joy," says Dr. Debbie. "VITAS is the first place I've worked where I truly believe that the needs of the patients come first. I've always been a patient advocate while working in hospitals and other facilities. At VITAS, it's clear that we all want what is best for the patient."

Crystal Witherspoon

Home Health Aide, Philadelphia

Founder's Award for Outstanding Service—HHA

Crystal Shines Like the Sun— Even on Dreary Days

Even during the worst winter weather and the darkest of her patients' and their families' days, Crystal Witherspoon is a ray of sunshine.

"The sun is always shining when Crystal is around," says Colleen Butler, a chaplain on Philadelphia Team 652. Crystal is one of the team's home health aides.

When an ice storm hit last year, the VITAS office had to close and most of the staff went home. "But Crystal was out checking on her patients," says Rose Wall, Crystal's team manager. "She's a kind soul with a tremendous work ethic who puts patients and families first."

Crystal knows that her patients' and their families' needs don't stop with bathing, feeding or replenishing supplies. She knows they also need encouragement, a little laughter and someone to listen from time to time, even if that time comes after her day is done.

"When one of her patients died after regular work hours, Crystal went on her own time to be with the wife, who was also a VITAS patient," explains Rose. "When I asked her about this, Crystal said in her usual gentle manner that she just wanted the patient to know that we are there for her."

Crystal knows about hard times. When her husband died two years ago, she was left to raise four children (ages 8–19) alone. One of them, her 13-year-old daughter, is battling leukemia for the second time.

Crystal hasn't let those adversities bring her down; instead, she developed a positive attitude that is unmatched. "She always remembers staff birthdays and celebrations, and she makes her fellow co-workers feel better when times are hard," says colleague Victoria Tucker, RN.



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Send stories or ideas to VitalSigns@vitas.com.

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