

Catholic Health World

Families spread holiday cheer in gratitude for loving care of aged
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Outpouring of appreciation can take form of parties, cash bonuses for employees

By **KEN LEISER** (<https://www.chausa.org/staff-email?id=105149>)

Each year, Teresa Anderson, her siblings and their families descend upon the dining hall at Presence Merkle-Knipprath Countryside in Clifton, Ill., to host a holiday party replete with hand-baked cakes, caroling and games.



Tobias Ruppel, center left, and his cousin Brody Watson review bingo cards with Jackie Serene, left, and Lois Parrish, right, during the Berns Twins Memorial Christmas Party for residents and staff of Presence Merkle-Knipprath Countryside, a long-term care facility in Clifton, Ill. The party was Dec. 2. *Amy Smith / © CHA*

Entering its 18th year, what is now known as the Berns Twins Memorial Christmas Party is named for Anderson's mother, Rell Yohnka and aunt, Christine Dubuque — twin sisters who lived at the long-term care facility until 2006, when both died within several months of each other. (Berns was the sisters' maiden name.)

The family-run party at Ascension's Presence Merkle-Knipprath is just one example of how families display ongoing gratitude to long-term care facilities and compassionate, hardworking staff for care provided to their loved ones.

At **D'Youville Life & Wellness Community** in Lowell, Mass., one family donated \$105,000 to permit the facility to make five \$1,000 cash awards annually to nurses, certified nursing assistants, meal preparers, activities staff and housekeepers nominated by their colleagues.

The staff at the facility's 84-bed dementia unit had cared for the donor's mother for four years until she died in 2017, said Don Main the facility's director of communications. D'Youville announced the first round of gifts on Oct. 15, which corresponded with the birthday of St. Marguerite d'Youville, the woman who inspired the founding of the facility's sponsoring congregation.

"These are folks who are not accustomed to recognition," Main said. Some of the recipients were humble about the attention the cash awards brought to them.

D'Youville will invest the remaining \$100,000 from the initial gift to sustain the annual awards, Main said. Depending on the growth, it is possible that the number or size of the annual gifts could grow as well. Main said the family requested its name be withheld.

Moved to tears

In spring 2017, the family of Eleanor Simko turned out to celebrate her 100th birthday at Jennings in Garfield Heights, Ohio, where Simko had lived for more than a decade — first in the Jennings assisted living residence and later at the nursing home. The Sisters of the Holy Spirit sponsor the continuum-of-care campus.

"Everyone knew my mother, my mother knew everyone there," said Michelle Simko, who lives in Cleveland. Staff and residents were invited to the party, which was held in a room off the main lobby of the nursing home.

Her mother had a "fantastic time," Simko recalled. When family members offered heartfelt expressions of gratitude to the Jennings staff for being like a second family to their mother, there was "not a dry eye in the entire room," said Lisa Brazytis, chief marketing officer at Jennings.

One of Simko's daughters told those assembled that her family "felt their mother was in Jesus's hands, the way we cared for her," Brazytis said. "It is very profound as a Catholic organization for the family to feel and equate the care of their mother to us as if our staff were caring for Jesus and people in the likeness of Jesus, and in the spirit of Jesus's teachings and Mary's traditions."

Simko died about a year after her milestone birthday. And one segment of the family's four-part eulogy was devoted to thanking the Jennings staff for their care.

Party on

Not long after twin sisters Rell Yohnka and Christine Dubuque moved into Presence Merkle-Knipprath in November 2000, Yohnka's and Dubuque's grown children decided to have a quiet birthday celebration for the sisters, who both had Alzheimer's disease. It evolved into an annual party for residents and staff.



Paul Yohnka calls out images during a holiday-themed bingo game at the Berns Twins Memorial Christmas Party. His sister Teresa Anderson, right, assists. *Amy Smith / © CHA*



Louis Benoit, left, spots the icons on a holiday-themed bingo card with Laretta Lafond during the Berns Twins Memorial Christmas Party at Presence Merkle-Knipprath Countryside. *Amy Smith / © CHA*

The sisters' dementia "came on slow and progressed," said Dodie Ashmore, one of Yohnka's daughters. Through it all, the staff "was just so good to them. They were both very sweet. They smiled. They sang together. And the staff just learned to love them."

Yohnka's husband lived at Presence Merkle-Knipprath for about a year in the early 1990s. Ashmore's mother-in-law, age 95, moved into the 99-bed facility in October.

The Berns twins' birthday was Dec. 10. And, in 2001, Anderson, who is Ashmore's sister, suggested giving the birthday party a Christmas theme and inviting all the residents.

Yohnka died in March 2006 and Dubuque in October of that same year. Anderson said when a staff member commented that everyone would miss the annual parties, she replied: "Well, we just can't let that happen, can we?" Yohnka's family would carry on the tradition.

All four of Yohnka's children are involved in the annual party. (Yohnka had a son Dennis who died in 2016.) Along the way, Yohnka's grandchildren and great-grandchildren got involved, providing muscle and new enthusiasm.

Each year, Anderson, Ashmore and their sister Susanne Hildebrand buy gifts for each of the residents and employees. Gifts can include such items as hats, scarves, tablecloths, pajamas, kitchen supplies, and soap and towel sets.

Some residents don't get many visitors, let alone regular gifts, said administrator Karen Grillion. "It might be the only gift they get," she said. The same goes for employees. In a recent year, Grillion learned that one of the associates at the facility was homeless and the gift he received at the Berns Twins Memorial Christmas Party was the only one he got.

The party has a different theme each year. The first year was "There's no people like snow people." This year's theme is "Santa Claus Lane."

Anderson, who lives in Chicago, said she drives about an hour to the facility for the party. Her brother Paul Yohnka drives from his home in Kankakee, Ill., while her sisters, Ashmore and Hildebrand, live in Springfield, Ill., and Jackson, Mo., respectively.

Twelve years after the death of their mother and aunt, the annual holiday party continues as a labor of love.

"I think if you ask any one of us, we would say that we are doing it to make our mom proud of us," Anderson said. "She was so darned good to us. She just was always helping somebody out. Inviting somebody over for dinner. Doing so many lovely things for people."



Ashmore



Grillion

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