



Toni McGibbon: a life of dedication and service

BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

When Toni McGibbon first decided to volunteer at Horton Hospital in Middletown in 1997, she was simply looking for a way to get out of the house after her husband, Herbert McGibbon, passed away. He was from Youngsville in Sullivan County.

Little did she know that this choice would lead to 26 years of dedicated service and countless connections with patients, staff and fellow volunteers at what is now Garnet Health Medical Center.

McGibbon holds the honor of being Garnet's longest-serving volunteer, having donated over 17,000 hours to the hospital. Reflecting on her journey, McGibbon said, "I wanted to help people. I enjoy it. As long as I can get out of bed every day and get dressed, I'll keep volunteering."

After suffering from seizures and being unable to work, she decided to volun-

teer to stay active.

"I wasn't able to work, so I started getting Social Security Disability, and I said, 'I want to get out of the house, I don't want to just sit around,'" she explained.

McGibbon began her service in the transport department, where she became a familiar face to patients, transporting them to tests, their inpatient rooms, or discharging them after treatment. One of her favorite tasks, she recalled, was helping to discharge newborns and their families.

Mary Bingham, a colleague from the transport department, praised Toni's infectious positivity: "We always used to joke that she'd come off the elevator with a happy smile. She's just a very warm person, very loving, and whoever she helps picks up on it immediately."

Even during the pandemic, when many volunteers were sidelined, Toni was eager to return to her duties. "I knew it would probably change sooner or later. I didn't think it would

last forever," she said, referring to the pause in her transport duties.

Once back, Toni transitioned to the registration desk, guiding patients through check-ins and offering directions with the same compassion she brought to transport.

Maureen Roche, Manager of Volunteer Services, praised the lasting relationships Toni has built over her years of service: "The most amazing thing she has accomplished is the relationships she has fostered here—with our patients and with our community at large. She is a tremendous asset to us."

Lisa Lewis, a long-time friend and co-volunteer, reminisced about their early days together: "We just connected from the start. After work, we'd pick her up and go to happy hour. She's been part of my family ever since."

At a recent celebration honoring Toni's years of service, she was recognized for reaching 17,000 hours of volunteer work, equiva-



Toni McGibbon

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lent to over 12 million steps and approximately 6,400 miles—the distance from New York to California and back.

Jonathan Schiller, President and CEO of Garnet Health, said, "Thank you for showing everyone here and in our community what caring truly looks like. You've given so much to the patients we serve, and we are all grateful."

McGibbon remains humble, saying, "I enjoy helping people. I enjoy being here," she said. "As long as I can get up and keep moving, I'll keep volunteering."

Joe Adonnino, Director of Environmental Services, echoed the sentiment, calling Toni "a special human" who cares deeply about both patients and staff. "She's always there, always caring passionately about the people she helps. She's a wonderful person."

Now 72, McGibbon shows no signs of slowing down. "As long as I can get out of bed, I'll keep volunteering," she said.

Healing through food: Center for Discovery's Nourishment Arts initiative

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY PATRICIO ROBAYO

At The Center for Discovery (TCFD), an institution dedicated to innovative care for individuals with developmental disabilities, a unique program is transforming the relationship between food and wellness. Under the leadership of Chef Cesare Casella, the Department of Nourishment Arts (DNA) integrates culinary excellence with therapeutic practices to nourish both body and soul.

Casella, a culinary expert with a storied career in New York City's top kitchens, now channels his passion into creating meals that are as healing as they are delicious.

"It's important in life to do something that you enjoy," Casella said. "And this I enjoy—being here with all these people and doing something special."

His deep commitment to the residents of The Center for Discovery is evident in every aspect of DNA, from the care taken in sourcing ingredients to the innovative ways in which food is prepared and served.

The philosophy behind DNA, according to TCFD, is grounded in the belief that food plays a crucial role in healing. Casella's early experiences in his family's trattoria in Lucca, Italy, instilled in him a profound respect for fresh, high-quality ingredients.

Now, at The Center for Discovery, he has crafted a program that involves residents in every stage of food production—from planting seeds to preparing meals, and ultimately, enjoying the fruits of their labor.

"We're not just feeding people; we're nourishing them," Casella explains, emphasizing the holistic approach that defines DNA.

During a recent visit to the Center's farms, at the wash barn, residents carefully cleaned and prepared freshly harvested vegetables, taking pride in their work. "These ingredients have memory and give stimulation to the brain," Casella noted, highlighting the sensory and emotional benefits of such activities.



At the vinegar production facility, a key element of the Center's agricultural operations, residents are involved in every stage of vinegar production, from pressing apples to bottling and labeling the final product. This work is both therapeutic and educational, offering residents the opportunity to develop fine motor skills while contributing to a valuable community resource.

Sam Rose, who oversees aspects of the vinegar production, says that on press-



ing days, the scale of the operation is impressive. "We're making over 100 gallons of cider," Rose said. "We have six or seven different classrooms coming in, and 40 or 50 different people participate. It's all to help get the vinegar program going."

Central to Casella's work is a profound respect for the dignity and individuality of each resident. "To have a house where they have the kitchen, where they have their own room, that is a respect for



Clockwise from top: New team members receive training on meal preparation for residents at The Center for Discovery.

On the left, Chef Cesare Casella, Chief Department of Nourishment Arts (DNA) with Alex Needham, the farm director with a recent harvest that will be soon meals for the residents of The Center for Discovery.

The imported oven from Spain bakes approximately 52 loaves of bread daily, along with pizza crusts and rolls, using a special rotating interior that assists residents in easily placing the bread inside.

Residents at The Center for Discovery wash freshly harvested vegetables, engaging in sensory and motor skill activities while learning about food growth and preparation.

the person," he emphasized, highlighting the importance of personal space and autonomy in the residents' lives.

Casella also addressed the common misconception that individuals who have difficulty expressing their needs are without them. "Some people think that because someone can't express themselves well or ask for what they want directly, they don't have needs," he said. "But if you're careful, you see when someone is happy, when

they're doing something they love. This work gives them that happiness and respect."

The "Seed to Belly" program, a community-driven initiative, engages local farmers, healthcare providers, and educators in a collaborative effort to support the residents. This approach ensures that the food produced is not only nutritious but also tailored to the specific needs of each individual.

Alex Needham, the farm director, has been instrumental

in shaping this mission. "The farm is a place where residents can connect with the land, develop skills, and find peace in their work," Needham explained.

Needham also emphasized the farm's role in the community: "We don't focus on production for profit; it's about creating meaningful work that gives everyone a sense of purpose." This philosophy aligns with the Center's broader mission of using therapeutic farming as a tool for personal growth and healing.

The CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program is another facet of the Center's outreach, allowing staff

and community members to purchase shares of the farm's organic produce. The initiative not only helps fund the Center's operations but also strengthens its connection with the surrounding community.

"We couldn't do this alone," Casella admits. "It's the people we work with, the community, that make this possible."

At the bakery, Kayla Shattuck, one of the Center's bakers, was preparing loaves of bread using ingredients sourced from the farm.

Shattuck, who works alongside head baker Joseph Rodriguez, explained how the bread is made using natural yeast and baked in a wood-fired oven imported from Spain. "We try to use as much as we can from the farm," she said, pointing to the rosemary used in their garlic rosemary loaves. "We're always churning out bread—about 52 loaves a day, plus pizza crusts and rolls."

The sense of pride and fulfillment among the residents was palpable. Whether washing vegetables, labeling vinegar bottles, or preparing bread, the joy on their faces was unmistakable.

Casella's work at the Center is about more than just food, he says—it's about creating an environment where residents feel valued and empowered. The Healthy Six model, which integrates diet, exercise, emotional regulation, education, environment, and community, forms the foundation of the Center's care. This holistic approach has led to significant improvements in the residents' overall well-being, according to Casella, from better sleep patterns to enhanced cognitive function.

Casella's vision for the program is to partner with more healthcare facilities and launch additional educational initiatives. "We're just getting started," he says with a smile. "There's so much more we can do."

