

'He served his country, then served the rest of us for all those years'

By Sean Kirst  
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Lucinda Walts, a nurse manager at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Syracuse, tells a classic Larry Barry story. Years ago, Lucinda did a routine cleanup of a patient's room. She found a pair of pajama pants thrown onto the floor. Lucinda wrapped them in a sheet and tossed them in the dirty laundry, which was soon

toted away. A while later, the patient returned from wherever he'd been. He asked Lucinda what she'd done with his pajamas. When he learned they were in the laundry, he became upset and said:

"I had a couple of hundred dollars and some new lottery tickets in those pants!"

Lucinda felt sick. At a hospital that generates mountains of dirty laundry, she had no hope of locating a single pair of pajamas before they went into a washing machine.

Larry Barry, for his part, was undaunted.

He was a VA volunteer. To the staff, it seemed as if he'd been at the hospital forever. He happened to be stationed, that day, on the same floor as Lucinda. He told her to follow him. They went to the basement, with Larry growling and cussing and being ornery in the affectionate way that was his style.

They got off the elevator and walked into a labyrinth of laundry bins and machines. Lucinda despaired. Larry zeroed in on his destination. He found a pile of clothes and started fishing, and before long he pulled out a balled-up sheet. Out came the pajama pants, the money and the lottery tickets.

"After that, whenever I saw him, I'd tell him, 'You saved my life,'" Lucinda said.

Larry died Tuesday at the VA, in the care of the nurses who loved him so much. The entire staff kept an eye on him: A good friend from housekeeping was at his side for his last breath. The nurses saw him as a selfless and irreplaceable part of the hospital.

Since 1995, when he signed on as a volunteer, he logged more than 13,000 hours of volunteer time at the VA.

The staff counted on Larry: He knew the place, inside-out. "He was always there," said Cerylann Lococo, a nurse.

"He was there on every holiday, on every special occasion."

His death, less than a week before Veterans Day, triggered an outpouring of grief. Friday, the VA observed a moment of silence in his honor, and there are tentative plans for a larger memorial. "He was just a downright good guy," said Beth Lambertson, a program support assistant, who remembers the day when Larry dropped both his wallet and checkbook in the hall.

Beth found them and gave them back. Larry never forgot her kindness. He was always trying to buy her little gifts as a means of thanks. Beth would say she couldn't take them, that it was against the rules.

Larry would argue that he didn't give, well, he didn't give a damn about the rules.

But he did. "He was always about the hospital," Cerylann said. "That was his life."

As for his world beyond the VA? Even now, it is a mystery to his friends.

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Larry Barry, a Korean War veteran and longtime volunteer at the VA Medical Center in Syracuse, poses earlier this year with Dr. Margherite Bonaventura, a surgeon who performed several procedures on Barry. He died last week at the age of 80. (Syracuse Woman Magazine June 2013 / Photo by Cindy Bell)

# THE VA RECALLS ITS ULTIMATE VOLUNTEER

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Bonaventura, a now-retired surgeon, Bonaventura was photographed with Larry, 80, for the magazine. The image is precious at the VA because Larry left behind almost no photographs.

Bonaventura, who knew him as both a patient and a volunteer, described him as "a gentle man" who served as a Marine during the Korean War. Beyond that, Larry shared few details about his personal life, although he told the staff he had a sister who died not long ago, and relatives in Florida.

The archives at The Post-Standard contain only one reference to Larry, a note about how the VA — in 1999 — selected him "volunteer of the year." Friday, a check of old city directories at the Onondaga Historical Association provided a few bits of information:

The records show a Lawrence Barry who grew up on the near West Side, then went into the military in the 1950s. Around 1955 he returned to Syracuse, where he was listed as a student.

A 1961 directory refers to him as a "superintendent" at ShoppingTown, the retail center in DeWitt.

Then he basically vanished from the books until the mid-1990s, when he was listed as living on James Street — about the same time he became a volunteer at the hospital.

Wendy Ryan, a nurse and a good friend, describes him as kind of the ultimate military veteran: "He served his country, then served the rest of us

for all those years," she said. The staff recalls how Larry seemed to know the name of every employee and patient in the building. Lloyd Pitman, 83, a resident of the VA's community living center, said Larry always walked down the hall on Sunday mornings, checking to see which patients wanted to go to church.

"He was the greatest guy," Pitman said.

As Larry grew older, his health started to disintegrate. He was forced to use a walker, and then a wheelchair. He'd joke about it — "They keep trying to kill me, and they can't do it!" — but his stays as a patient at VA grew both longer and more frequent. The appreciative staff doted on him; Wendy Ryan recalls how kitchen workers made sure he got whatever treats he wanted with his meals.

In his final days, he was in the care of Wendy and other nurses on the floor known as 7B. They can't remember any visitors stopping by from outside the hospital. Yet until the end, it seemed as if someone was always at his side.

In typical fashion, he showed wisdom. He chose to die at home.

Columnist Sean Kirst welcomes any notes from readers who remember Larry Barry. You can write to Kirst in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202, email him at skirst@syracuse.com, visit his blog at www.syracuse.com/kirst or send him a message on Facebook or Twitter.

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