In the lead-up to the holidays, many people expressed concerns that COVID-19 would ruin the magic of the season. If stay-at-home orders canceled travel plans and Zoom fatigue threatened virtual gatherings, could this time of year really be special? The staff at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center made sure it was! From spreading joy and sharing meals, to giving back and getting ugly (in tacky sweaters), let’s reflect on how PPMC made the season merry and bright.

'Tis the Season of Service
To kick off the holiday season, Bridget Abdalla, CMA, administrative assistant for Cardiology; and Jennifer Nelson, MSN, RN, NE-BC, nurse manager of Ctyp 3 East, hosted a Thanksgiving food drive for Chosen 300. The community-driven ministry put out a call for canned vegetables, bread stuffing, cranberry sauce, and other Thanksgiving trimmings to include in baskets for 50 underserved West Philadelphia families. Abdalla, a frequent supporter of the ministry, was overwhelmed by her coworkers’ generosity, noting, “The holidays were tough on everyone this year, but it’s important to give back when you can. We filled two cars with donations.”

Many traditions were put on hold this year due to social distancing guidelines, including the annual Children’s Holiday Party. However, PPMC had no intention of letting down the kids who look forward to the toys and treats distributed by Santa each year. Instead, the Community Outreach Council organized a toy drive benefitting the People’s Emergency Center (PEC) in West Philadelphia. PEC is a non-profit that serves homeless families, primarily consisting of single mothers and young children. These families have often experienced trauma and require employment, housing, and mental health support. In addition to collecting helpful household items, gift cards, and winter clothing, PPMC also amassed a colossal mountain of toys to brighten up the season. From rideable toy trucks to art supplies to basketballs, generous staff members across the hospital stepped up, showed their true holiday spirit, and restored a sense of excitement and wonder to the season.

“Even though we weren’t able to move forward with our normal plans this year, I’m proud that we still found a way to support our most vulnerable community members and ensure these kids enjoyed a memorable, magical holiday,” said Gary Ginsberg, assistant executive director of Facilities.

Good Tidings and Great Gifts

Staying Jolly on the Job

Employees who worked on Christmas day received a delicious surprise in lieu of the typical annual Holiday Meal in the cafeteria. More than 750 hot, individually wrapped meals were delivered to the hospital, courtesy of Stephen Starr’s Jones Restaurant and Dim Sum Garden (via Off Their Plate). “We know what a difficult year this has been for everyone, and especially for health care providers and essential support staff. We’re so grateful for their resilience. There is something about a hot meal made with care and passion that makes people feel comforted,” said Suzanne Smith, MEd, CHES, director of Patient Experience.

Employees also had the chance to participate in PPMC’s second annual Ugly Sweater Contest. While they couldn’t model their unstylishly sartorial choices together this year, staff were invited to send in photos for judgment by the PPMC Experience Committee. Of all the photos submitted — some featuring pets, kids, and illuminated decorations — only one could be named the “best” overall. Congratulations to employee relations & retention specialist Kim Elam, MBA, PHR, SHRM-CP, who nabbed the top spot with her Santa-inspired ensemble, which was laden with sparkling tinsel, colorful ornaments, and even candy canes.

On December 16, PPMC staff took part in a historic moment as they rolled up their sleeves and received their initial dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. Among the first to add a vaccination sticker to her lapel was Chief Pharmacy Officer Nishaminy Kasbekar, PharmD, FASHP.

Kasbekar has directed the smooth, successful distribution of the vaccine in partnership with departments across the hospital. Powered by the collaborative efforts of Occupational Medicine providers, the Infection Control Team, Facilities staff, and more, the Medical Library has functioned as a socially distanced vaccine clinic for the past several weeks, serving thousands of staff who have taken the next step toward ending the pandemic. Outside the library, staff have filled posters with notes about what the vaccine means to them.

For Kasbekar, it’s hope. “I’ve seen our employees come to work every day with the possibility of exposure weighing on them. Vaccination means getting back to our lives,” she said. “I know some people are feeling hesitant, and my suggestion is to talk to your provider about vaccine myths-busting. As a pharmacist who has studied the efficacy and safety data, I am confident that the vaccine offers a safe way forward.”

Employees are being notified via email with the opportunity to make appointments for vaccination. If you have questions about scheduling, please reach out to your manager. For other vaccine FAQs, visit the UPHS Vaccine Information website.
Every month, PPMC staff members who embody Service, Teamwork, Achievement, and Respect, are named Presby STARs. In addition to earning recognition from their colleagues, these outstanding all-stars also receive a certificate from CEO Michele Volpe and a $100 award.

Whether they’re on the front lines or behind the scenes, PPMC’s clinical and non-clinical staff consistently go the extra mile — from CNA Christian Dance, who offered a shoulder to cry on after a patient argued with her partner, to Culp East nurse Robert Rathmann, RN, PCCN, who took a trip to Rite Aid after discovering a patient’s hearing aid was lost. These employees like security officer Donnie Moody take time to treat every patient with kindness and respect. Moody was assisting a nurse with a discharge when they realized their patient only had one shoe. The man was homeless, and it was raining. Without a second thought, Moody went to his car, returned with a pair of new, unworn work boots he’d just purchased, and gave them to the patient. The patient was astounded by Moody’s selflessness, and his nursing colleague noted, “Donnie made me proud to be a Penn Presby employee.”

Patient care associate Christine Leichman also demonstrated exceptional empathy for an end-of-life patient in the Trauma Surgical Intensive Care Unit. The patient’s family unfortunately had to make the heartbreaking decision to stop medications and have her breathing tube removed; after praying and singing, they chose to leave the room before the patient passed away. Leichman remained, however. She learned while caring for the patient that she had a loved gospel music, so she continued to play the patient’s favorite gospel songs and sat at her bedside, quietly talking and keeping her peaceful in her final moments.

Thank you to all of our STARs for demonstrating compassion and courage each day. You are an inspiration to your patients, colleagues, and community!

Penn Medicine processes thousands of samples daily. What’s your team’s role in that effort?

Lab testing is what we do every day, but COVID redefined and expanded our horizons. Presby has four sites (the hospital, 3737 Market Street, Cherry Hill, and Woodbury Heights) dedicated to testing patients ahead of their scheduled surgeries and procedures. We were also assigned oversight of a community testing site in West Philadelphia. Drive-through and tent locations tend to be weather-dependent, though, so we moved into 4040 Market Street at the beginning of November. Approximately 100 community members and 40 employees are tested there per day.

We’re extremely busy, but it’s worth the long hours, many phone calls, and seven days of work. Standing up the pre-procedural testing sites in April meant we could bring patients back for elective surgeries and procedures. Providing rapid testing for employees gives them peace of mind and protects them, their colleagues, and their patients. And having a permanent community testing site breaks down barriers so anyone can get tested.

The pandemic has been marked by constant change. What challenges have you had to navigate?

Our lab has surpassed pre-COVID volume (of all other types of tests), plus we’re managing COVID (testing) volume. We’ve had to learn a lot very quickly over the last 10 months — how to swab patients, how to process samples with different technologies, how to turn around results so we’re not keeping patients waiting or employees out of work... Testing supplies are also in huge demand, so in order to have adequate inventory, we had to lean on multiple vendors and set up four different testing platforms.

But I have a fantastic, hardworking team. Our staff jumped in right away to learn about these platforms while also shouldering their normal responsibilities, and we built remote teams with new employees at all of our testing sites after [temporarily reassigned] staff returned to their own departments. Even though there’s this additional puzzle to work on that no one ever expected, I’m not working at it alone.

With so many samples to process, I imagine it can get overwhelming. What keeps you motivated?

Early on in the pandemic, I found out that there was a sizeable amount of employees who couldn’t return to work because they’d been exposed, and it was starting to pose a bit of a crisis. The problem wasn’t that staff were quarantining — that was important to keep their patients, colleagues, and families safe. However, because they’d been tested outside of the health system, it took days for results to come back. That’s when my team and I really made a commitment to rapid testing employees and getting results in about six hours. Things like that have really made a difference, and it feels good to participate in that process.

We’ve been living in a COVID world for 10 months, but I’m optimistic about the new year. As we continue rolling out the vaccine, I believe that even if we’re not COVID-free, we could be COVID-managed. Soon, this monster will be behind us.