Nurse Super-Smile
How Good Samaritan Medical Center oncology RN puts humor in healing.

By Steve Dorfman Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

For some folks — like nurse extraordinaire Joel Zapata — professional destiny seems preordained.

“I was kind of born into it,” Zapata explains. “My mother, aunt and cousins are all nurses. I guess they saw potential in me, and encouraged me to go into the field.”

Good thing they did — and that Zapata listened — because now, he says, “I couldn’t possibly imagine myself in another profession.”

And the oncology patients at West Palm Beach’s Good Samaritan Medical Center — where Zapata, 36, has worked for the last decade — would miss out on being tended to by this tirelessly enthusiastic and creative professional. Those who work with him describe Zapata as being the Patch Adams of the nursing department.

Puerto Rican roots

Born and raised in a small town in Puerto Rico, the extroverted Zapata, a self-described “people person,” earned his nursing degree in his homeland.

But he always knew he wanted to come to the U.S. because “I had big dreams about what I could do in nursing. There were more opportunities here.”

The first U.S. opportunity came a dozen years ago in a Connecticut Veterans Administration hospital via an assist from — of course! — one of his cousins, who worked at the facility and helped secure Zapata’s interview.

He loved working at the VA hospital where he felt “honored to be taking care of real-life heroes.” But the Connecticut climate was a bit brisk for him and his Puerto Rican-born wife.

So, when they got a chance to move to South Florida in 2003, “We jumped at it.”

Immediate connection

From the first day Zapata worked on the Good Samaritan oncology floor, he says, “I felt at home. I knew this was where I was supposed to be.”

That’s because he felt an immediate bond with his often-desperately ill patients and their families.
“Treating cancer patients is about more than just providing compassionate medical care. There’s also the fear and depression they experience. I feel a responsibility to keep their spirits as high as possible.”

To cheer up his charges, Zapata might decorate their rooms, or perform a quick song-and-dance for them. “Anything to make them smile.”
And he dons a costume every holiday.

“This past Halloween, I came dressed as a hippie,” he recalls. “One of my patients said to me, ‘Now I know I’m going to get good drugs.’”

One of the optimistic philosophies Zapata espouses to his patients is that “they’re already survivors. I tell them, ‘You don’t know how long you’d had the cancer before it was diagnosed — so you’ve already survived it. Now we have to try to defeat it.’”

Zapata also relishes the collaborative nature of the care he and other Good Samaritan staff members provide.

“We all rely so much on each other.”

And in oncology, where the patients often reside long-term, Zapata explains, “You really get connected to them and their loved ones.”

So much so, he adds, that “you become like part of their family.”

Thus, when remission is no longer possible, Zapata “protects them until the very end.”

For his standout work, Zapata was named Good Samaritan’s 2013 Oncology Nurse of the Year, and he has been nominated multiple times for Palm Healthcare Foundation Nurse of Distinction honors.

But awards and accolades are not what motivate this dedicated lifelong nurse.

Rather, “It’s the opportunity to provide care and comfort to people when they’re at their most vulnerable.”

Zapata’s relatives taught him well.
Known as the “Patch Adams of the nursing department,” Joel Zapata enjoys making his patients smile with his holiday costumes.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Nurse Super-Smile on Page 1D of Tuesday, May 06, 2014 issue of Palm Beach Post