

RIGHT: Bright yellow gerber daisies  
BELOW: Leslie Perkin



**M**ONDAY MORNING in New York's flower district is a hectic flurry of color and efficiency as stems are sorted, snipped, and shipped throughout the city. Most flowers are sent to floral shops, hotels, businesses, restaurants, and caterers where they'll be cut, plied, and arranged to great effect. Yet each Monday morning, 2,000 stems are selected for a special destination. These flowers are chosen with great care—they must be unscented, not prone to drooping, and able to thrive in warm temperatures. Standard favorites are gerber daisies, alstroemeria, spray roses, lisianthus, and orchids—oncidium, dendrobium, and phalaenopsis. Each Monday morning (Tuesday and Thursday too), this special order of flowers is shuttled from 28<sup>th</sup> Street in Chelsea to the Upper East Side and delivered to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) for use in the Fresh Flower Program.

The Fresh Flower Program of the Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (as it's officially known) has been in operation for 34 years and, with up to 200 arrangements to tend on a daily basis, it's quite an operation. Powered by a small but faithful group of volunteers, the program provides flowers in all of the hospital's public spaces and makes sure that each new patient receives a flower on arrival.

## a bloom for every bedside

**For nearly four decades, fresh flowers have lent their healing power to patients at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.**

BY KIRK REED FORRESTER  
PHOTOS BY UDOM SURANGSOPHON

In 1860, Florence Nightingale, perhaps history's most celebrated nurse, wrote, "I shall never forget the rapture of fever patients over a bunch of bright colored flowers. I remember (in my own case) a nosegay of wild flowers being sent me, and from that moment recovery becoming more rapid."

The Fresh Flower Program was conceived with Nightingale's point in mind; flowers can act not only as objects of beauty for the sick, but also as agents of healing.

## flower power



LEFT: Cheerful wine bottle arrangements  
BELOW: The ubiquitous carnations



The Program was founded in 1974 by Judith Garden, then dubbed as "the doyenne of creative flower arranging" by *Town & Country* and the current star-in-residence of New York's flower world. After 30 years in business, Judith had just closed her famous flower shop on 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Around the same time, she began making frequent trips to Sloan-Kettering to visit a sick friend. While impressed with the strides the Center was making in research and medicine, she thought the facility needed brightness and cheer.

In short, she thought it needed flowers.

Soon thereafter, she attended MSKCC's spring dinner dance where the wife of a hospital board member asked if there was anything Judith would like to do at the Center. Judith replied, "Sure, I'd like to start a flower program." Within 20 minutes, she had her program.

Initially Judith had very little to work with and only a handful of volunteers. Standard vases were hard to come by

and even harder to keep as they had a tendency to conspicuously disappear, so the group started accepting empty wine and champagne bottles donated by fine restaurants and generous individuals. The wine bottles and magnums proved enormously effective and they remain the group's container of choice. The program began modestly, placing poinsettias in the 14 waiting rooms at Christmas the first year, but it grew quickly.

Still, it was an effort run on Judith's enthusiasm and a shoestring budget until noted floral philanthropist Enid Haupt made a generous donation and committed to fund the program in perpetuity, giving it the support and stability it enjoys to this day.

**"I shall never forget the rapture of fever patients over a bunch of bright colored flowers. I remember (in my own case) a nosegay of wild flowers being sent me, and from that moment recovery becoming more rapid."** FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

Today, the Fresh Flower Program is run by Leslie Perkin, a former florist herself, who has been arranging flowers at the Center for the last 25 years.

"It's a lot of work, but fortunately, I love it," she says.

Leslie is joined by a rotating roster of twenty other volunteers, including a retired florist, a former president of The Garden Club of America, and a number of Garden Club members.

The week begins with the delivery of the selected 2,000 stems on Monday. Leslie and the volunteers (whom she affectionately calls "her girls") gather in the garden room of the



hospital's recreational pavilion where glass bottles line the shelves. The volunteers make their arrangements and load them on carts to deliver to waiting rooms, lobbies, and reception areas. On Tuesday morning, Leslie and another crew of volunteers gather and repeat Monday's exercise—more arrangements, more deliveries.

When asked about the response from patients and their family members, Perkin says, "Every week after the girls make their rounds, someone has a different anecdote to tell. But basically it's always the same message: 'We love the flowers. Thank you so much.'"

On Thursday, Leslie teaches a flower arranging class for the patients. Any patient, regardless of experience or expertise, is invited. Leslie says she is always inspired by the results.

"We get amazing things. Nobody ever makes a bad arrangement," she insists.

By Friday, it's time for another group of volunteers to make the rounds again, this time to pick up the bottles so the arrangements can be replaced and the bottles washed and readied for Monday. It is a daunting task. Memorial Sloan-Kettering is the largest cancer center in the world and there are often 200 arrangements throughout the facility.

In addition to the arrangements, Fresh Flower volunteers make sure that new patients receive a carnation when they arrive.

"We have a flower by the bedside of every patient within the first 24 hours they're admitted," says Leslie. "Because people come [to MSKCC] from all over the world, many patients don't have visitors. The flowers we give them might be all they receive while they're here."

After 34 years, the Fresh Flower Program has become something of a staple around the hospital, a beloved program that brings beauty and cheer to a place that can often feel bleak. As I follow Leslie through the labyrinth of hospital hallways, weaving through waiting rooms and reception areas (and making frequent stops as she plucks dead blooms), I marvel at the sheer magnitude of the task that she and her volunteers undertake every single week. I ask how they manage it all.

"This whole hospital runs on devotion," she says simply.

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center is a place where devotion takes many forms, but certainly one of the most welcome is a cart full of wine bottles overflowing with flowers being gently pushed down the hall. ❖



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