

The Southern Accent

Vol. 79 Issue 16

Feb 7, 2024

## Lights Volunteers revived, community members serve as pseudo-patients for nursing students

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On Feb. 1, participants from Southern's Lights Volunteers program helped train nursing students in the lab by becoming practice patients.

This opportunity allowed students of Health Assessment II to put their skills to the test while connecting with the community, according to Elani Dodd, assistant professor in the School of Nursing.

"Lights Volunteers is a way for people in the community to get involved on campus," said John Boone, assistant director of Alumni Relations. "These are sometimes alumni, sometimes former employees or professors. Sometimes they are people who don't have a connection to the university but want to get involved with the ministries that go on here."

According to Southern's website, Lights Volunteers began in 2005 when Chris Carey, who was

the vice president for Advancement, and Alumni Relations director Cheryl Torres, who was then a student worker, had the idea of starting an organized volunteer program on campus.

Today, many of the program's volunteers are retirees.

"In retirement years, we want to still be of service," said Lester Merklin, who participated in the practice-patient lab. "That's why we chose to move somewhere near Southern, so that we could do things with college students. ...[It] keeps me young."

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Lights Volunteers often collaborates with academic departments on campus.

"Pre-COVID, the School of Nursing had a vibrant relationship with Lights Volunteers," said Dodd in a phone interview with The Accent. "That relation-



Nursing student Leilani Darnell checks the pulse of a Lights Volunteer. Thursday, February 1, 2024. (Photo by Eliana Morales)

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ship faded with the onset of COVID, and now we're bringing it back this semester."

Rebuilding the size and scope of this volunteer taskforce has been a process, according to Boone.

"It's been a little while trying to get this program back up to the size it used to be," he said. "Volunteers used to be all over this campus and helping in every department. ... We are trying to not only get connected more with the School of Nursing, but also [with] all departments on campus, to get volunteers active again."

The practice-patient sessions are a step in that direction not only for Lights Volunteers participants, but also for students. Practicing assessment skills on the volunteers has a positive impact on learning, according to Dodd.

"They have such a wealth of life experience," she said.

"Some are nurses, some are not. It gives students a chance to assess a diverse population with diverse health history."

During the lab, the nurses-in-training also gain a sense of what working with real patients is like.

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"I couldn't cut corners," said junior nursing student Leilani Darnell. "Also, they have real stories. Because they've lived a longer life, they have more of a medical history than my peers would."

Working with Lights Volunteers in the lab may also help students begin to build a network, Boone explained.

"A lot of our volunteers are older; about 60% are retired," he said. "Each of those alumni have

lived a life of their own. ... Some of them might be retired business [men] who have a brother who runs a hospital in Detroit, which is maybe where a student wants to go after graduation. You just never know what connections are going to be made, which is something that can be very valuable."

The practice-patient lab was Marilyn Pyles's second volunteer event since joining the program two months ago. She recently retired from nursing and expressed that her favorite part of working with the students was their kindness and eagerness.

"They're just a joy," she said. "[It's] hard to explain that enthusiasm. Because as nurses, sometimes you get kind of old and grumpy, and these nurses are new and fresh and excited to learn."

The next practice-patient volunteer opportunity is on Feb. 29. Lights Volunteers who are interested should contact Elani Dodd at [elanidodd@southern.edu](mailto:elanidodd@southern.edu). To join the Lights Volunteers, apply online at [southern.edu/volunteers](https://southern.edu/volunteers).



Nursing student Benny Santos practices administering an IV during a nursing skills lab. In early February, community members volunteered as practice patients for nursing students, allowing them to build their skills with live patients. *Thursday, February 1, 2024.* (Photo by Andre Ottati)