Ellen Kovacevich has worked in Mission Hospital’s Rehab Services for more than 21 years. She’s the reason many of the employees would never dream of working anywhere else. Laura Brozak, Occupational Therapy, remembers the first time she and Kovacevich were assigned to work with a lymphedema patient. Brozak recalls that neither she nor Kovacevich felt “competent” in treating the patient. Still, they resolved to do their best for her. Kovacevich brought comfort to the family by helping them understand that although the patient may not have long to live, treating the lymphedema could greatly improve her quality of life. Since Mission Hospital didn’t have the necessary resources at the time, Kovacevich researched the area, found a lymphedema program at another facility in Orange and then personally coordinated the patient’s transportation.

“As a result of meeting this patient, Ellen began studying to become a certified lymphedema specialist,” Laura says. “She wanted to be able to do better if she were ever assigned a patient with lymphedema again.”

Since then, Kovacevich has become quite an expert treating patients with lymphedema. She goes above and beyond to make them as comfortable as possible. Since insurance doesn’t always cover the necessary bandages and sleeves, Kovacevich works with vendors to obtain donated items. Many times, she has taken support garments home for alteration on her own time and at her own expense. She’s become adept at altering a bra so it can be put on with one hand.

“This way, a woman can get dressed without having to ask her husband for help. It preserves the patient’s dignity,” Brozak says. “She does this even when it’s not her own patient.”

As manager, Kovacevich made a special effort to find out how individual staff like to be acknowledged and takes the time to get to know them. When a co-worker enjoys a bit of success, she posts it on the department bulletin board. According to Gene Huizenga, Occupational Therapy, Kovacevich will bring in a special baked good in acknowledgement, whether it is a professional achievement or the accomplishment of a personal goal.
Kovacevich also takes charge of the department’s holiday decorations, often bringing hand-crafted items from home like bows, wreaths and other colorful holiday decorations. She even decorates the holiday tree at Christmas. Each season, she does something a little different, spending out of her own pocket to help provide a warm, welcoming workplace.

Richard Dorenstriech, Occupational Therapy, appreciates Kovacevich’s excellent listening skills and the way she is attuned to the people she works with. He said she creates a positive working environment by the way she listens, maintains good eye contact and remembers things that are important to others.

“When you think of employee retention, it’s working with people like Ellen who make you want to stay on the job,” Dorenstriech said. “She is part of the Sports & Wellness culture. It’s like a family here.”

Thanks to Ellen Kovacevich’s efforts, Rehab Services is a “home away from home” for patients and staff, alike. She has taken the time to truly understand and address their various needs — and they know it. Her selfless acts are a powerful example of the many ways she’s contributed to the success of Rehab Services at Mission Hospital.