

Living History: Special Approach Care from a Familiar Face

Dave Harris reflects on Perley Health as it was, what it is now, and what it means to the people who call it home.



By Meg O'Connell, Communications Specialist

Dave Harris has been at Perley Health for so long that the residents have referred to him, over time, as resembling their sons, their brothers, and now their dads. This is Dave's own joke, that he shares with a laugh, as he reflects on his time spent at Perley-- a career that's spanned thirty years.

Beginning his career at National Defence Medical Centre [NDMC], Dave was one of the staff members who moved over to the newly named The Perley Rideau Veterans' Health Centre upon its amalgamation with NDMC, the Perley Hospital, and the Rideau Veterans Home more than 25 years ago.

"What I immediately appreciated about moving over to Perley was the available space for the residents," says Dave. "The NDMC had shared rooms and semi-private rooms, but Perley allowed the Veterans and Seniors in our care to have more privacy and their own space. There's also plenty of natural lighting, space to walk, large windows for them to soak up the sun, and plenty of activities to keep them active and feeling more at home."

Dave appreciates how smoothly Perley made the transition for everyone, ensuring the residents were well cared for and supported, and that staff had all of the resources they needed.

"It was great when we transitioned into the new residence because a lot of the same staff were able to move over as well. The residents were able

to have a lot of the same people continuing their care amidst and after the move, so having people they knew and had relationships with already was great; to provide that continuum of care for them and of course, for the staff to continue nurturing those relationships with their residents as well."

Once settled at Perley, Dave spent most of his time working in the Ottawa building, but soon found that he gravitated more towards caring for residents living with dementia. He transferred to the Gatineau building, where he continues to work and remains passionate about providing "special approach" care.

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"[The residents] have taught me so much it's almost mind-boggling, getting to work with them because you hear all of their stories. It's living history. They share their lives with you and you get to hear about all of these monumental moments, and you get to live big moments in history through them! There's a difference between reading about history and hearing it first-hand. These stories you hear, they're all so selfless. It really makes you learn so much, and learn so much about yourself, as well."

One of the most memorable stories Dave remembers is that of a resident who worked at the Canadian Embassy in Iran in the 1970s. During a hostage event most will either remember either learning about in school, hearing about on the news, or watching via the 2012, Oscar-winning film “Argo”, American diplomats were sheltered by the Canadian Ambassador to Iran. What many might not realize, is that a Veteran residing in Perley was directly involved.



Dave with Veteran and Perley Health resident, Wilfred Summers, during a Remembrance Day ceremony, pre-pandemic.

“One of our guys, one of our Veterans, he was the one who sheltered some of the Americans in his house, and he originally brought this situation to the attention of the Ambassador. He and his wife sheltered six American diplomats. When you read about the story, it seems that the Ambassador had done all of this stuff to help, when it was in fact our Veteran who had done so much more to help in that situation.”

In addition to the rich history, Dave admires how hard Perley works to provide inclusive services and care for not only the residents and tenants but for the families and loved ones as well. He credits Perley’s ability to be a “one-stop-shop” for families as a big reason why people find it so easy to choose Perley as the place they trust to care for the people they love and, in some cases, for themselves later on. Dave has a personal connection with Perley himself, sharing that his mother was involved in the Day Program before becoming a resident.

“It’s really special to have a community here where we have residents who are mother and daughter, or where staff has their family members being cared for here, and even where staff have come to choose to stay here themselves when it’s time. It’s these circle of life moments that make it so that Perley holds a special place in people’s hearts.”

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It’s the finer touches built into Perley’s walls, that really separates Perley apart from other long-term care homes, Dave says. From the Tree of Life, to the upkeep of the grounds, down to the smallest details, Dave notes that it’s all of the sentiment and thought going into every aspect of resident care that makes such a difference.



Dave Harris serves birthday cake to a resident, shortly after moving into the new Perley Hospital.

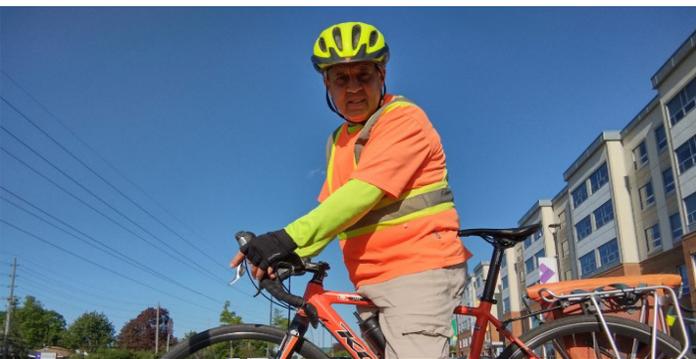
“It’s very clear how much thought went into the construction of and still goes into the maintenance of our facilities. Every single detail was clearly considered in terms of what would most benefit and have the most meaning for our residents. Even the tiles on the floor have meaning, you know? The different coloured tiles

in our buildings that converge in the middle of our hallway celebrate our history. The red tiles of Rideau, the blue tiles in Ottawa, and the green tiles in Gatineau buildings (each named for Ottawa's three rivers) coming together... it's the three rivers, the three buildings converging in the middle, forming what is now Perley Health."



Always happy to grab the mic and share a few inspiring words, Dave gives a speech at a Perley Hospital BBQ.

The attention to detail doesn't stop there, Dave shares. It's the subtleness in the touches that could go unnoticed, or that many may not even think of, that make all of the difference. While others may enter the grounds and simply see some trees, Dave notes that Perley has made a point to plant a variety of different kinds of vegetation to provide residents with the opportunity to observe a large number of different species of wildlife, different kinds of plants flower, and given them the ability to really take in nature year-round in their own home.



Dave gears up for the 2022 Let's Bike program, an initiative he spearheads at Perley every year as organizer and team captain for team Perley Health.

In addition to his day-to-day work at Perley, Dave remains incredibly involved. Most may also know him as the man behind the Let's Bike program

campaign at Perley Health, an effort that encourages professionals in Ottawa to consider an alternative method of transportation to-and-from work (and everywhere else) that benefits the environment as well as their health. He was the "resident bus driver" before the pandemic hit; and is also credited as one of the key staff members who made it possible for residents to connect with their loved ones at the beginning and at the height of the pandemic through the Virtual Visits program, which notably assisted with more than 2,990 video and phone calls in the spring and summer of 2022.

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"It's been special [to] be a part of a place that is known for providing this excellent continuum of care," says Dave. "It's in the services that are offered for the families and for the residents, and the different levels of care we offer. People could come for the day, people had the overnight stay program and the ability to stay for an extended period of time while their loved ones are receiving care, we have the assisted living, we have the apartments and all of this is on top of the residences. It's our ability to offer so many different things. It's been interesting to see the organization change over the years, but comforting to know that our level of care remains unmatched and that that won't change."



To mark the grand opening of our building 25 years ago, staff, residents, volunteers and other members of the Perley Health community created a time capsule. They filled a wooden bench with mementos and asked that it remain sealed until 2021.

We are excited to announce that we are once again immortalizing Perley Health by sealing the Memory Bench to be opened again 25 years from now, and we want you to be a part of it! We invite you to contribute your own memories and memorabilia to the Perley Health Memory Bench. Please visit www.perleyhealth.ca/memorybench for more info and email info@perleyhealth.ca to submit.