

Mercy Health Partners, Muskegon, MI

In the emergency room at Mercy Health Partner's Mercy Campus, Mitch Rowland was more worried over how he was going to pay the bill than about the excruciating pain in his chest.

When his wife, Christina, urged him to see a doctor, he resisted, but gave in when the pain became unbearable. Mercy's doctors began treating him for pericarditis, a potentially life-threatening inflammation of the membrane around his heart. Almost immediately, his pain subsided, and two days later he went home, still worrying about the bill.

"That was my fear coming into the hospital," said Mitch, 26 and uninsured. "I can't afford to be here. I can't afford to be healthy."

As the economy slipped into recession and stagnated, Dr. Robert Hoogstra saw more uninsured patients coming to the emergency department at Mercy's Hackley Campus.

"We are the place of last resort for a lot of these people," Hoogstra said. "They have nowhere else to go, so they come here."

That's why he decided to support a new program called the Gift of Health. Throughout its history, Mercy has cared for all patients, regardless of their ability to pay, but as the cost of uncompensated care increased, the Mercy Health Partners Development Council, a volunteer committee, in fall 2009 created the Gift of Health to seek donations and partially offset those bills.

"People were rationing their care," Claudine Weber, Mercy Health Partners' chief development officer, said. "If you're sick, please come in. We first will treat you, then we'll figure out how to cover the bill."

Dr. Richard Peters, a retired physician, and his wife, Nancy, pledged regular donations for the Gift of Health and were surprised at how willing others were to support it.

"Nancy and I stepped up and said, 'We're not going to just talk about it. Here's our pledge.' It's to help those who are struggling in our community."

Mitch and Christina Rowland filled out forms requesting financial assistance. The newlyweds had graduated from college just as the economy slipped into recession. He worked part-time at the library in Grand Haven. She was unemployed. When a letter arrived notifying them Mercy was forgiving their entire hospital bill, "I cried," Christina said. The care her husband received was excellent and the staff exceptionally kind, she said, regardless of their lack of insurance.

"If I could pay for it, I'd love to because of what they did for me," Mitch said. "It was humbling to see that people are doing this – the people who donate to this program, the people at the hospital. I'm incredibly grateful that Mercy did this."

The Rowlands vowed to one day support the Gift of Health, if they ever could afford it. In 2012, after Christina was hired into a full-time job, which included health insurance, they decided the time had come. They sent a \$250 check to the Gift of Health – no small sum for the young couple.

"It was a life saver for us, and I want it to be there for others in the future," Mitch said. "Hopefully, this won't be the last time that we support it."



Christina and Mitch Rowland