

Sports



BRIAN ALLENBY | Staff Photographer

Sophomore forward Lei Lei Hairston visits with Rose Holland, a cancer patient at the Cancer Center at Alamance Regional Medical Center. Hairston visits the Cancer Center every Tuesday.

Sophomore forward leads team off the court and into the community

Lei Lei Hairston inspires teammates to volunteer at local cancer center

Gabriela Szewcow
Design Chief

The Cancer Center at Alamance Regional Medical Center is usually filled with cancer patients, family members, doctors and nurses. But lately, there has been a new crowd inside the Cancer Center's walls.

The Elon women's basketball team began volunteering at the center the second week of February, and it's all because of sophomore forward Lei Lei Hairston.

During lunch one day in December, Hairston decided she wanted to give back to the community. She and her teammate, sophomore forward Kelsey Evans, began thinking of ways in which they could help.

"Initially I really wanted to reach out to children, but then I started talking to Coach (Ken) Butler about it, and he suggested reaching out to the hospital," Hairston said.

Assistant coach Ken Butler set up a meeting between Hairston and Vivian Langley, director of patient relations, management development and diversity at Alamance Regional Medical Center.

"(The call) was just out of the blue," Langley said. "(Coach Butler) asked if there were any volunteer opportunities for the basketball team. They wanted to give back to the community and he asked if they could do that here."

Langley was the one who suggested the girls volunteer at the Cancer Center. She thought the patients would benefit from having young, healthy women around.

Hairston liked this idea, and the girls took advantage of the opportunity. After Hairston presented the idea to her teammates, the response was a resounding "yes" in support of the volunteer idea.

"It's been awesome so far," Hairston said. "You would think at a cancer center, it would be sad, gloomy and depressing. But really, this place has a lot of life to it."

Head coach Karen Barefoot said the volunteer work has already brought a positive change to her team.

"I'm excited Hairston took on this idea," Barefoot said. "It has brought the team together. I've noticed a real difference in my girls in the last few weeks."

She said the girls have embraced their community work, and as a result, the community has shown more support of the girls' team.

"The community is our sixth man," Barefoot said.

This season marks the team's highest attendance rate since 1989. Barefoot believes the girls' dedication to their community has really helped that number. The girls on her team represent a fraction of what she believes is a student population full of passionate, driven students.

"There is a high level of character on this team," she said. "And that's the kind of person that goes to Elon. You can feel it all across the campus."

Hairston represents that energy both on and off the court, according to Barefoot and Langley.

"We've never had anybody from a service organization or a local school say they want to come volunteer in our facility," Langley said. "So it was unique for us to have that."

She believes the volunteering has been beneficial for all parties involved.

"I think it's been positive for both the hospital, our patients and the students," she said. "They really seem to like it. And they were very motivated and very excited for the opportunity."

Hairston agreed that the experience has been an all-around rewarding one.

"The whole idea around volunteering was not only to impact a patient and help out any way that we can, but also to have the patients impact us, as well," Hairston said.

Part of her goal was to really connect with the patients she would be working with.

"I was hoping people would make connections here," she said.

Hairston said she and her teammates have already made friendships in the short amount of time that they have been volunteering at the Center. They hope they can maintain these connections in the future.

The girls visit the Center at different times throughout the week, depending on their schedules. Hairston and her teammate, junior guard Jermile' Batten visit the Center every Tuesday. A few

members of the team volunteer twice a week.

While volunteering at the Center, the girls help patients with any needs, including providing a warm blanket or something to drink or eat. In addition to providing physical things, Hairston quickly realized that a pressing need for these patients is company.

"Even something as simple as a conversation, I've found, is very helpful to get them through what they're going through," Hairston said.

Langley said the employees and patients are more than happy to have extra hands and young energy around the Center.

"The staff have been very receptive to have the extra help and have the young ladies here," Langley said. "So I think it has been a win-win for everybody."

Langley noted the large impact that Hairston has had on patients who come to the Cancer Center, even in the short amount of time that she has been volunteering there.

"I told her she doesn't realize the impact she has on people, especially children, and people who might be sick and not feeling well," she said. "I told her that her presence and her team's presence could really be positive for (the patients)."

Hairston said she hopes this volunteer activity is just the beginning for the women's basketball team in terms of community involvement. She hopes the team can continue the volunteer tradition next semester and even next year.

"Hairston is doing something really special that we hope will be a tradition for the team," Barefoot said. "(She) hopes to pass the baton on to a younger teammate when she graduates from Elon."

Both Barefoot and Langley believe Hairston's willingness and drive are apparent, especially through the service idea she brought to her team.

"It speaks very highly of Hairston to want to get involved in the community," Langley said. "I think she has a lot of energy and wants to give back. And I'm glad we have her."

MORE ONLINE: SPORTS

VIDEO:

Follow Lei Lei Hairston to the ACU and to the hoops.

<http://bit.ly/TPOleilei>

ZACHARY HORNER | Multimedia Editor