

Monroe County Honors MCH Resident, WWII Hero

Monroe County and MCH celebrate centenarian and WWII veteran Joe Vazzana.

ROCHESTER, N.Y. — Monroe Community Hospital resident Joseph “Joe” Vazzana has lived long enough to see a lot of things: the end of a world war, the rise of television, men walking on the moon — and now, a day named entirely in his honor.

The Monroe County Executive Adam Bello officially proclaimed Oct. 29 as “Joseph Vazzana Day,” celebrating the World War II veteran’s courage, humor, and century-long legacy of service.

The ceremony, held before about 160 people at Monroe Community Hospital, was filled with applause, laughter, and a few happy tears as Bello presented the 100-year-old Vazzana — who turns 101 on Nov. 8 — with the special proclamation.

“Joe reminds us what service looks like — not just in uniform, but in everyday life,” Bello said. “He’s a living example of humility, strength, and gratitude — the kind of American hero who built this country and still holds it together.”

Vazzana smiled at the crowd and gave a modest shrug. “They keep calling me for these things,” he joked. “I don’t know why — maybe I just talk too much. In the beginning, I was stunned. I wasn’t expecting all that.”

Those who know him, including MCH staff, say the recognition is well deserved.

Born in 1924, Vazzana grew up on Rochester’s west side and was drafted into the U.S. Army at age 19. He served as a private first class in the Third Cavalry Mechanized Unit — a scout and mechanic who spent long days on the move through war-torn Europe.

On Sept. 5, 1944, a day he’ll never forget, his unit was ambushed near the border of France and Germany. “We were surrounded,” he recalled. “They hit us from behind, and there was nowhere to go.”

Vazzana and several others were captured by German forces. He spent more than a year in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp, where food was scarce and hope even scarcer. Of those taken prisoner that day, only seven survived.

“You had to keep believing,” he said. “I told the guys, ‘Hang on — one day, you’ll see our tanks rolling in.’ And that’s what happened. The 14th Armored Division came through and freed us.”

After returning home in 1945, Vazzana married, raised a family, and built a steady career in electronics before co-owning a used car lot with his son.

Old newspaper clippings, photographs, and letters from Veterans Affairs — along with a sharp memory — help him relive his experiences with his family, which now includes children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

During the ceremony, Bello presented an official proclamation recognizing Vazzana’s wartime heroism, decades of work in Monroe County, and his lifelong embodiment of the values of duty, perseverance, and compassion.

Vazzana’s advice for living past 100 is as straightforward as his personality. “There’s no secret,” he said. “You just live each day, and every day’s a little different.”

As bagpipes played “Happy Birthday” and cameras flashed, Vazzana shook hands with guests and staff, soaking in the moment and feeling deeply appreciated.

"They still come by telling me how much fun they had," he said. "Everybody really enjoyed it."

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About Monroe Community Hospital

Monroe Community Hospital is a skilled nursing facility located in Rochester, NY, offering long-term care along with Rehabilitation, Respiratory, Pediatric, Dementia/Memory and Palliative & Hospice services, a robust calendar of resident programs, and much more. With nearly 200 years of service to the community, MCH continues to lead in innovation and compassion while offering essential care across the healthcare continuum for individuals of every age.

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